

Pornography and Erotica and the development of adolescent male sexuality and spirituality

John's parents contacted me. They caught him looking at pornography on his smart phone. John shared that this had been a regular occurrence for some time. While they want to support John in his journey through the explorative and self-discovery teenage years, they are also concerned that John's habitual use of pornography may have longer term negative implications. While this habit is concerning to both parents, John's mother is slightly more concerned than his father. Both have a strong positive relationship with John, and, while their use of this positive relationship has enabled the conversation to come into the open, they ask me to speak with John about this concern.

John is a fifteen year old male who attends a Christian high school, lives in a stable Christian family, and clearly articulates his Christian faith. In session, he talks about his looking at pornography as being a problem for some six months and that he moves between hot and cold about wanting to 'break the habit'.

Discussion:

In your experience, how prevalent is the use of pornography among teenage boys (your own personal awareness)?

What would be your initial reaction to John's 'confession'?

How do you think different parents/other staff within your school would have responded?

I have been working with Christians and in Lutheran Christian schools for some twenty years. John's case is somewhat typical. For many Christians, talking about sex is a 'taboo' subject. The cultural influence of Lutheran piety has led to a reticence to have open and frank family and school discussions about sexuality and spirituality. This is somewhat of a departure

from what Martin Luther would have intended; “Lutheranism could espouse an attitude to the body that sought not to transcend physicality but to embrace it, in all its aspects” (Rittgers, 2012, p. 207). This is partly due to the fact that Lutheran Christians rejected “both traditional rituals as a means of coping with suffering and traditional mysticism as a way of entering into the Passion. From the Catholic (and modern-day anthropological) perspective, these rejections amounted to a demotion of the role of the human body in Christian spirituality” (Rittgers, 2012, p. 203).

Thus the conundrum. Our threads of history have impacted our cultural and spiritual identity and how we make sense of our world. In John’s case, this has the potential to live itself out in shame. Shame “is a complex emotional response that all humans acquire during early development” (Vanscoy, 2006). However, when shame becomes “an integral part of a person’s self image or sense of self-worth” (Vanscoy, 2006) it can create lasting personal and social problems. For John, being a person of developing faith, it is essential to help him work through the internal emotions that he is experiencing through pornography. Without appropriate ways of working through ‘life issues’ teenagers can grow into young adults who carry a burden of shame. This can develop long lasting and significant emotional and social issues. “Shame is highly correlated with addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, (and) eating disorders” (Brown, 2012).

Diagram - shame as a negative impact on human nature. (see OneDrive)

Catholic priest, Richard Rohr (nd) maintains that sexuality and spirituality are closely interrelated. Therefore, they should be able to be discussed in an open and honest way, without the fear of shame. In the coming 30 minutes, I want to explore the issue of pornography and erotica, with a particular overview of a biblical perspective. I then want to look at its influence

and impact on the developing teenager. Finally, I want us to explore different ways that we could help teenagers, like John, make sense of their developing spiritual and sexual world.

Understanding Pornography and Erotica

A cursory look at modern Christian literature holds great disdain for pornography. In different Christian circles, it spoken of as a Satanic “sexual attack against the mind of humanity” (Murphy, 1996, p. 122), a “demonic evil that traffics in human sex” (Thomas Nelson, 2001) and as an assault on “the senses and sensibilities of the Christian” (Nelson, Thomas, 1995). But is it? Hawkes (2006) notes that 16th and 17th century literature “produced visual and written erotic imagery to nourish and excite sexual fantasy” (p. 88). Indeed, to look at some of the images on the walls of the Sistine Chapel, the statues of Michelangelo or read some of the language of the ancient biblical text Song of Solomon is to see and read equally erotic imagery.

The word ‘pornography’ comes from two Greek words *porneúō* and *grápho*.

In the Old Testament, *porneúō* was used in the context of unfaithfulness (Kittel & Bromiley, 1985) (see Amos 2:7, Jeremiah 5:7, Hosea 1-3). Over time, its meaning took on a broader interpretation. This interpretation expanded to “not only fornication or adultery but incest, sodomy, unlawful marriage, and sexual intercourse in general” (Kittel & Bromiley, 1985). It also depicted “the use of sex for subjugation, aggression, degradation, abuse, coercion, violence, dominance, control, sadism or rape” (Balswick & Balswick, 2008, p. loc. 4585). This interpretation was carried over into early Christian thinking.

The original sense of the Greek word *grápho* was to “carve” or “engrave” (Kittel & Bromiley, 1985). Thus pornography is often associated with images of a sexual or graphic nature. However, there is a dark side to these images. Caputi (2003) defines pornography as “sexually explicit materials that purvey and survey a feminized subject who becomes the object

of a domineering and possessive phallic presence and gaze” (p. 181). That is, pornography has a tendency to dehumanize people.

The word *eros* does not appear in the Greek translations of the bible. According to Jeanrod (2010), this is partly due to the concern of the translators regarding potential confusion between the Hebrew God Yahweh and the Greek god Eros. Language often loses meaning and intention through translation, and so the exclusion of the word *eros* as an appropriate word to translate the Hebrew *ahab* (which has similar sexual overtones as *eros*) resulted in “the problematic rupture between eros and agape in the Christian theology of love” (p. 32). The outcome was a denial of the erotic nature of spirituality; and in its original form God’s love itself is ‘erotic’ in that it pursues humanity (Wood, 2010).

At this point, it is important to distinguish between pornography and eroticism. In quoting Octavio Paz, Burrows (1998) states “[E]roticism is first and foremost a thirst for otherness” and that it is essentially about desire... “a shot fired in the direction of the world beyond”. In this respect, there is a close relationship between the thirst for otherness, the thirst for transcendent connection of eroticism, and spirituality (Black, 2003). Rohr (nd) suggests that spirituality has to do with sexuality (and in this context eroticism – as an energy that drives humanity toward life), and pornography has to do with ‘genitality’. Burrows (1998) contends that pornography dehumanizes others, while eroticism connects with others. Balswick and Balswick (2008) conclude that; “Both erotic and pornographic material can be sexually stimulating; however, pornography is used to degrade others, while erotica celebrates human sexual experience” (p. loc. 4592).

Eros connects the whole person. Timmerman (1992) notes “Those who deny their bodies and their feelings, thinking that the real self is the mental subject, are never wholly available. Some part, the vital, spontaneous part, is always under constraint. Touch is always feared” (p. 37). Black (2003) agrees; “the knowing that comes from eros strives to form a union,

to be part of, in proximity to the other, while cognitive knowledge, attempting to divorce itself from eros, focuses on the control of the other known and its usefulness”. In other words, being aware of the whole self (including the breadth and depth of ones sexuality) is essential to being real! This has much to say about the importance of teenage boys being able to explore and express their sexuality.

Discussion: How readily do you find teenagers (in general) and teenage boys (in particular) talk about issues of sexuality? What do you think are the stumbling blocks?

The reality, however, is that there is a very fine line between what can be understood as erotica, and what is pornographic. Our current culture confuses these two (Rohr, nd). Consider the controversy surrounding Fifty Shades of Grey. Released on Valentine’s day, “it promotes abuse, narcissism, and misogyny’ (and) represents a twisted form of love that dehumanizes women and twists the hearts of men” (Westen & Hawkins, 2015). Thus the danger of erotica is that unguided, “(it) can lead us astray... it is a potent and ambivalent force, and thus eroticism must be channeled, guided by rules that shape its energy, so that some ordered form of ‘culture’ might emerge from the undifferentiated power of ‘nature’” (Burrows, 1998).

Sex and Shame

My observation of working with teenagers is that there is a lot of shame associated with sex – that is the reason why there are sniggles and giggles.

The ancient Hebrews, in understanding themselves as being created in the image of God, saw that that included “bodies, minds, and spirits, genitals and all” (Ellens, 2009, p. loc. 214). As the historic church moved away from that wholistic understanding of humanity and

spirituality, as it became influenced by other religions and philosophical perspectives (Douglas & Wood, 1996), as it developed moral codes to maintain this separation (Hawkes, 2006) (Taylor, 2007), it inadvertently transformed natural and normal yearnings into experiences of shame (Balswick & Balswick, 2008). The Christian church, especially which had both ancient and medieval influences that repressed sexual experience, ended up driving “sexual play underground... (which) increased the prominence of pornography, adultery, pedophilia, prostitution, and other forms of secretive and illicit sexual practices” (Ellens, 2009, p. loc. 1200). The irony of this repression is that by not celebrating the natural drives and needs of humanity, cultural impositions distorted it.

Christians are particularly guilty of this. Anecdotally, sex and sexuality seems to be spoken about with more openness in secular institutions than in religious institutions. When was the last time you heard a positive celebration of sexuality within either a school chapel or a Sunday church service? To totally misquote the intent of Dietrich Bonhoeffer with his statement about ‘evil’ (not doing anything to stop it is to be still doing it), by not talking about sex and sexuality in terms of celebration, we maintain the perception of shame.

So what is it about shame? Shame “relays the message that one has not just done something wrong, but deep inside, the person is flawed at the core and therefore can never measure up” (p. loc. 1328). This has a profoundly negative impact on a person’s sense of self-worth.

Thus, in talking with teenage boys in relation to their sexuality, even their natural interest in viewing the nakedness of the female form, it is essential to protect that child’s sense of self-worth, because, as has been previously noted, shame is incredibly destructive. If teenage boys do not have a safe place to explore and understand that which is going on inside of them, it will have lasting consequences on both themselves, as well as future partners and on society as a whole.

Healthy Exploration, Porn and Erotica

Perhaps as an attempt to alleviate concepts of shame, modern society tries to distinguish between pornographic literature and images with words like ‘soft porn’ and ‘explicit porn’. This is not necessarily helpful, as in considering different surveys on pornography use, it is not always clear what understanding of pornography is being meant.

Thus attitudes towards pornography vary. In 2003, a survey of women who were or had been in a relationship with a man who used pornography found that “about a third described the porn habit as a form of betrayal or infidelity. But the majority were neutral or even positively disposed to their lover’s taste for smut” (Douthat, 2008, p. 84). McKee (2007) came to the same conclusion.

It is not surprising that some women felt betrayed by their partner’s habit. White and Kimball (2009), for example, note that the negative impact of pornography on healthy marriages is that it increases the risk of “separation and divorce, negative self-assessment of sexual experience, an inflated importance of sexual relations absent of emotional involvement, a feeling of objectification of female partners, decreased sexual intimacy with an intimate partner, emotional distance, and an increased likelihood of real-life extramarital affairs” (p. 352). From a contemporary Christian worldview perspective, what is surprising is that a majority of women were either neutral or positive about the experience.

The Christian church is not immune to the influence of pornography. In an unpublished survey in 2005, 39% of male church members “accessed internet pornography more than 25 times. And, among lower age group men, 19 to 22 and 23 to 29 year olds, the percentages were 60 percent and 59 percent respectively” (White & Kimball, 2009, p. 351). Perhaps, when looking at these sorts of statistic, all that can be said is that curiosity can be titillating. After all, “boy’s curiosity is healthy and natural” (Biddulph, 1997, p. 122)

This is certainly true when it comes to teenage boys. Siegel (2013) observes that sexual drives, fantasies and behaviours “are all a part of what we mean when we say that following puberty as adolescents we experience the maturation of our sexuality.” (p. loc. 3030). That is, emotions drive the adolescent, and “filled with these new emotions” (p. loc. 3032) they are virtually compelled to find a way to meet these needs.

And this is the conundrum is. Physiologically, teenagers have an explosion of hormones and emotions, of which they do not necessarily know what to do with. Within schools (or church institutions) by not talking about these sexual changes in a positive and open light, and on a regular basis, we continue to drive healthy conversations underground.

Discussion: What are your current practices of negotiating the sexuality mine field within your school? In what departments is sexuality most discussed? In what departments should it be discussed?

Effects of Pornography on the developing individual

A review of current research suggests that there is a diverse range of opinions of pornography on the social, emotional and physical effects on the developing individual. There is common acceptance that regular viewing of pornography can lead to changes in “attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, self-concept, social development, and brain development” (Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, 2012; Chen, Leung, Chen, & Yang, 2013, p. 157; Wetterneck et al, 2012). This can result in emotional (depression/anxiety/insecurities) and relational (decreased satisfaction) issues that can also lead to hostile (Flood & Hamilton, 2003; Flood, 2009) and risky behavior (Wetterneck et al, 2012; Hilton & Watts, 2011). For example, when internet pornography use is used to manage moods, it can result in “experiential avoidance (which) may

maintain and/or exacerbate compulsive... and addictive behaviours” (Wetterneck et al, 2012). Additionally, pornography hinders social development (Kheswa & Notole, 2014), often promoting desensitization, disinhibited behavior, and attitudinal issues (Lo, Wei, & Wu, 2010).

This can all be exacerbated by the perceived anonymous nature of internet pornography. Shim and Paul (2014) point out that feelings of anonymity not only leads to sexist attitudes, but also to reduced self-awareness. Such issues tend to reflect themselves in a vicarious experience that has little to do with the spiritual connection that sexuality is intended to express. Owens et al (2012) note that “pictorial stimuli such as pornography may be encoded in cortical regions in a more indelible manner when compared to other stimuli” (p. 114). This strongly influences the production of the ‘pleasure feeling’ chemicals of the brain, with the result being that “you’re probably 99.9% driven by the information and emotions (dopamine release) conveys to other parts of the brain” (Lehreh, 2009, p. 45). This can create an ‘addiction effect’ in the developing brain, thus increasing the potential for vulnerability (Owens, Behun, Manning, & Reid, p. 115) and negatively impacting the ability for an individual to make close connections with others, “pair-bonding” (Hilton & Watts, 2011).

However, it is important to note that there is no compulsive addictive response to the viewing of pornography. As with most addictions, it appears that some people are more ‘predisposed’ than others. “There are a lot of people out there using a lot of porn who have no problems with it whatsoever... so when does it become an addiction?” (Weir, 2014, p. 46). The real issue, therefore, is how people attach meaning to what they see or read; “although some couples seem to benefit from pornography, that’s not the case for everyone. When one partner uses porn at a high frequency... there can be a tendency to withdraw emotionally from the relationship” (p. 46). This tends to lead to “increased secrecy, less intimacy and also more depression” (p. 46).

Finally, there also appears to be a peer pressure connection to the use of pornography among adolescents. Bryant (2009) notes that “15-25 year old males primarily viewed pornography to get aroused or masturbate (48.8%), out of curiosity (39.5%) and because it’s ‘cool’ (28.5%)” and that there appears to be a correlation between exposure and “the biological and cognitive cycles that modulate sexual interest, desire and risk taking”. If pornography is understood as violence or degrading towards another, the psychological, developmental and emotional impact on a sexual partner is particularly concerning (Bryant, 2009).

As has been demonstrated, pornography can be very damaging to the social, emotional, physical and psychological well-being of an adolescent. However, “protecting children from sexual harm does not mean protecting children from sexuality. Indeed, maintaining children’s sexual ignorance fosters sexual abuse and poor sexual and emotional health.” (Flood, 2009, p. 394).

Implications for Practice

If spirituality and sexuality are intricately linked, then appropriate sexual education will strengthen the spiritual connection as well.

Unfortunately, this does not always happen in Christian homes. As one school chaplain told me, “Parents tell me that they send their children to a Christian school so that the teachers can do that bit”. Thus parental abdication of sexual education creates naivety and shame; “I was living in a good Christian family but we didn’t discuss about relationships. I had to navigate my own way”. This, coupled with the intentionality of being told to ‘be good’ opened the door for this particular client to a pandemic of shame. As I write this, I am reminded of my own need to navigate ‘my own way’ about sexual matters in my teenage years. As a young teenager, a friend and I discovered a pornographic magazine in a rubbish tip. He was not religious, so was fascinated by what he saw. I felt incredible guilt and shame – and upon

reflection realise that I had to ‘find my own way’. Ensuring that conversations remain open are essential to helping adolescent boys navigate their way beyond naiveté.

Healthy identity does not develop in a culture of shame. Working with teenage boys like John, requires a sensitivity to understanding how they make sense of their feelings and emotions, as well as developmental issues – emotional, social, neurological, psychological, and understanding of the impact of cultural pressures and exposure.

Discussion: Getting back to John... how would you deal with his struggles? If he is overtly Christian? If he is not?

In approaching John, there would be great value in adhering to the following principles:

1. Emphasise that what he is going through is normal teenage emotion. We are wired to respond to desire.
2. Provide education. Acknowledge the emotional, social, psychological and neurological responses to an interest in sexuality, and provide current research.
3. Recognise risk; physical, emotional and social (internal and objectification), as well as neurological issues.
4. Be aware of the continual influence of culture in the shaping of adolescent attitudes. Further research surrounding the influence of social media, digital images as well as innuendo in music and film on the development of teenage sexuality and spirituality could be beneficial.
5. Use John’s faith as a resource to celebrate the fact that he is desired by God; and God created him as a sexual and spiritual being. Help John to begin the process of integrating his sexuality with his spirituality.

Essentially, the ultimate goal, would be to help John make sense of the feelings and emotions he is experiencing, and see them in the context of relationship – relationship with

himself, relationship with others, and relationship with God. Within my own practice, I use what I call a 4P process; Problem, PPP. This process has been influenced by Narrative, CBT and Existential Therapies.

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