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# Reeducating Our Desires

BY SUSAN DOLAN-HENDERSON

**Pornography, especially when paired with consumerism, can be a powerful educator of our desires, turning them toward a sexual fantasy life that refuses all limits. Our desires need education, but it must be grounded in a comprehensive view of freedom and equality in Christ. Among contemporary feminists we find both interesting encouragement and surprising objections to this biblical education of desire.**

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**T**he expansion of the pornographic culture can be painfully obvious to us when we are surfing the Internet. Many of us have experienced searching for a seemingly innocuous website, but suddenly finding pornographic images inches from our face. This is why some companies are striving to make “family filters” for the Internet. We read about sexual predators that seek out young people and others in online pornographic chat rooms, and then lure them into more dangerous personal contacts.

But pornography’s influence is spreading through our culture in many more subtle and complicated ways. We are constantly barraged with objectionable sexual images, from our clothes catalogues (those of The Gap and Abercrombie and Fitch come immediately to mind) to our pop-stars. For instance, the persona of pop singer Brittany Spears intentionally was sexualized while she was still a young teenager. Her unbelievably revealing clothes then had an immediate impact on girls, so that their clothing emphasizes their sexuality at an ever younger age. In an appalling Pepsi commercial Spears dances suggestively while wearing a skimpy outfit; then in a living room former Senator Bob Dole watches this Spears ‘commercial’

with a dog next to him; “Down boy!” he tells the dog. These images promote a limited range of “desirable” body types, and set a standard which is often unattainable or at least unsustainable for the average woman. More subtly, the commercial teases us with the sexual image of the “grandpa child molester” and women being in pornographic scenes with animals.<sup>1</sup>

Some people excuse much of this sexualizing trend in our culture as harmless, or even therapeutic. These images help us release inappropriate sexual desires, they claim, and therefore restrain us from sexually abusing others. Just the opposite is true, however. Marketing trains the desires of the body to want more and more stimulation, and pornography extends abusive ideas, rather than extinguishes them.

Pornography, especially when it is paired with consumerism, can be a powerful educator of our desires. In this way, theologian T. J. Gorringer notes, pornography “gets close to the heart of the human condition, something that both the desert Fathers and Augustine realized.” Our desires should lead us toward the true, the good, and the beautiful that are found in God; pornography redirects them toward a fantasy life that refuses all limits. The Bible, fortunately, offers a remedy. “To turn from the Song of Songs to Deuteronomy, and all the prophetic writing influenced by it, we can understand God as educating and disciplining us,” Gorringer notes. “Desire needs education and Christianity is an alternative education of desire.” Gorringer sees secular feminism as instructive to this alternative biblical education of desire.<sup>2</sup>

### **THE FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF PORNOGRAPHY**

We can find allies among some anti-pornography feminists like University of Michigan law professor Catherine A. MacKinnon.<sup>3</sup> She defines pornography as:

the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women, whether in pictures or words, that also includes one or more of the following: (i) women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things or commodities; or (ii) women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or (iii) women are presented as sexual objects who experience pleasure in being raped; or (iv) women are presented as sexual objects tied up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or (v) women are presented in postures of sexual submission, servility or display; or (vi) women’s body parts—including but not limited to vaginas, breasts and buttocks—are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or (vii) women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or (ix) women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual. Pornography

also includes the use of men, children or transsexuals in the place of women. Pornography thus defined, is discrimination on the basis of sex and, as such, a civil rights violation.<sup>4</sup>

MacKinnon forcefully argues that pornography, even “soft porn” like *Playboy*, spreads discrimination against women. In hundreds of interviews with abuse victims, she also traces a link between pornography and sexual abuse, especially of women and children. She notes that the pleasure of women depicted in pornographic imagery makes it seem as though women really welcome rape and sexual abuse. Women’s “no” no longer means no, it secretly means yes; thus, the legal concept of consent becomes meaningless. Furthermore, since pornography is about the individual reaching maximum orgasmic potentials, it encourages non-relational sex. Women are presented as masturbatory objects, and the goods of human relationship are absent.

Because she believes that pornography demeans women by reinforcing the widespread view of women as depersonalized objects for the pleasure of men, MacKinnon promotes legislation to restrict distribution of all pornography, not just pornography involving children.

Christians believe that the human body and sexuality are good, for God declared them good along with the rest of the created order. So, we can agree with MacKinnon that the objectification of women and children into sexual tools for the pleasure of some is terribly wrong. Furthermore, we can agree that toleration of the various enterprises that engage in such objectification invites the dissemination of these ideas throughout the

culture. For the perusal of a pornographic magazine, as Henrys Chlor warns, “is in some sense, like entering a world unto itself; one gets an introduction to the world of pornography.”<sup>5</sup> Pornography creates a certain kind of world, and it is a world out of harmony with the Gospel. It is not a world where the truth will set us free, rather it oppresses women as it pollutes the general cultural landscape.

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### LOOKING FOR FREEDOM IN THE WRONG PLACES

Surprisingly, secular feminists are divided on how to respond to the pornographic world. Some, like MacKinnon above, actively oppose the distribution of pornographic products. Yet, other secular feminists, such as performance artist Annie Sprinkle and philosopher Judith Butler, are pro-pornography. They think that limiting pornography is yet another example of men controlling women's sexual expression and desire. They view any restrictions on pornography as attacks upon women's freedom and the First Amendment.

Even a brief look at the pro-pornography feminists' arguments can remind us how complicated the attraction to pornography has become in our culture. First, they doubt that pornography is as harmful as its opponents believe; otherwise they would not promote it as liberation for women. They point out that much of the evidence (such as MacKinnon's interviews) linking pornography to violence against women or children is anecdotal, and the few controlled scientific studies are not definitive.

What about the objection that pornography exploits women? Here the pro-pornography view takes a strange turn. They answer that women need to own the production of pornography themselves. When women make the money and use pornography as a vehicle of self-expression, this counters male domination. Since it is women's sexuality that has been culturally and legally restricted, total freedom is the only way to ensure women's true liberation.

Sex, opines Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*, is always a form of power *over* someone, never power *with*. Mutuality between men and women is a myth for her. Furthermore, she argues, there is nothing natural about sex or gender; what it means to be a man or woman is highly determined by society. Being defined like this by society is very oppressive, but, ironically, this oppression seems to allow for moments of "transgression" against any and all rules concerning sexuality and gender. Creating or using pornography, she thinks, can be a type of transgression for oppressed women. Their transgression of norms helps to disrupt oppressive power. Furthermore, by thumbing their noses at society's expectations, women can be, for just a moment, really free.

What a painfully convoluted argument Butler offers: when men make pornography, it is a form of domination, but when women create pornography, it is a 'freeing' moment! Pro-pornography feminists seem to be seeking the power to be as bad as they claim men have always been. Butler says that she wants bodies to "matter," but they don't matter much: their ultimate value is to be a tool for gaining power over other's sexual desires.

Butler's argument will be ultimately unacceptable to Christians with feminist concerns. We cannot accept the pro-pornography feminists' view of sexual freedom for women for many reasons. It has not worked to se-

cure women's true freedom. It mistakenly sees freedom as a zero-sum game, so that one group (women) gains freedom only by stealing it from another group (men). Rather, we can offer a comprehensive view of freedom and equality in Christ, with both sexes being held morally accountable and neither exploited as objects, sexual or otherwise. Since Christ came to reconcile the world, we must seek reconciliation between the genders that enables women and men to grow to full stature and freedom that is their inheritance in Christ.

This gospel vision of freedom for both sexes can be the seedbed for positive change in our culture. From it grew the women's temperance movement in the nineteenth century, which in turn was the fertile soil for the development of today's feminist movement.

Yet many feminists, including those in the pro-pornography camp, remind us of some subtle ways that cultural patterns and institutions can control women. We must confess that sometimes even our Christian faith has been distorted in ways that oppress women.<sup>6</sup>

We must proclaim the Gospel accurately, for it is an authentic source of liberation for women as well as men. Our biblical faith finds its feminist voice in the fact that only God is our Lord; we humans never are given mastery over one another. It finds its voice in its compassion for the out-cast. It finds its voice in the story of Jesus Christ, in the manner in which he treated and protected women, and in the important roles they played as Jesus' disciples. The Apostle Paul encouraged women working independently to spread the Gospel, in which there is "no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). We are all heirs to God's promise, which is reconciliation to God and freedom from all forms of oppression.

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#### **GOD'S WORLD IS DIFFERENT**

Let's borrow the concept of "transgression" as an instrument for resisting power. In this sense, Christians should transgress against all cultural worlds that conflict with the Gospel's message of dignity for all people, regardless of whether these cultural worlds represent the political left or

right. We ‘transgress’ pornography’s world when we allow the Christian story to form our sexuality and develop in us respect, modesty, and fidelity. This means positively that we can enjoy God’s ordained gift of sensuality and pleasure through marriage. The church can become what theologian Alejandro Garcia-Rivera calls the “the Community of the Beautiful,” and offer to our world the gift of sensual art.<sup>7</sup> (Of course, we will continue to reflect on how to draw the line between the sensual and beautiful versus the pornographic. John Peck offers helpful guidance in his article, “Erotic, but not Pornographic,” in this issue.)

In these ways we can be witnesses that God’s world is different—more beautiful, free, and exciting—than the world that pornography is so powerfully inviting us to enter.

## NOTES

1 Surely Mr. Dole was not aware of these associations. No doubt he was manipulated, as we all are manipulated, to accept certain images as authorized. Yet they are authorized by the overall culture of pornography that can hide its real power and intent. On this theme see Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture’s Revenge against Nature* (Harper and Row Publishers, 1981).

2 Timothy Gorringer, *The Education of Desire: Towards a Theology of the Senses* (Trinity Press International, 2002), 58 and 92.

3 See, for example, Catherine A. MacKinnon, “The Roar on the Other Side of Silence,” in Drucilla Cornell, ed., *Feminism and Pornography* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 130-153.

4 MacKinnon, “Not a Moral Issue,” in Cornell, 185-186. This is slightly modified from a definition approved by the Minneapolis City Council in 1983.

5 Henrys Chlor, *Public Morality and Liberal Society: Essays on Decency, Law, and Pornography* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 190.

6 No Christian who is serious about spreading the Gospel should ignore that Christians have done great evil in the name of Christ. For example, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a handbook used during the witchhunts in Europe that resulted in the deaths of millions of women, is filled with pornographic images. Thus, at times the institutions of Christianity have contributed to a culture of pornography. (See Susan Griffin, 8-81.) We must repudiate this past and state explicitly that Christians sinned and misused Christ in these cases.

7 See Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (The Liturgical Press, 1999).



**SUSAN DOLAN-HENDERSON**

is Associate Professor of Christian Ethics and Moral Theology at Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, Texas.