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# Sexual Encounters and Manhood Acts: Evangelicals, Latter-Day Saints, and Religious Masculinities

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## Abstract

The experiences of men in traditional religions are complex, at times inconsistent, and not necessarily the direct result of religious teachings. This article draws from two qualitative case studies to examine the ways in which evangelical and Latter-Day Saint men understand masculinity and their spiritual beliefs in the context of sexual activity. The authors present two masculine practices—acceptance of sexual rejection and sexual indifference—that allow religious men in this study to simultaneously challenge and uphold the system of hegemonic masculinity that their traditions promote. These findings point to the moments when creative, interpretative work helps religious men to reconcile their experiences with religious expectations and to alleviate the tensions they face in their everyday lives. This article offers new insights into how gender and sexuality studies may be integrated into the sociology of religion.

**Keywords:** masculinity, sexuality, lived religion, Internet, evangelical, Latter-Day Saints.

## Introduction

God is good, or so it seems when it comes to men. Many of the world's largest and fastest growing religions—such as evangelicalism,

Mormonism, Catholicism, and Islam—generally support men’s headship and women’s submission, or the belief that men and women were created by God to fulfill different and complementary roles that tend to privilege the choices and decisions of men. Scholars have criticized these religions for limiting leadership roles for women and devaluing women’s contributions to their religious communities (Ahmed 1992; Bush 2010; Dillon 1999; Gilkes 2001; Griffith 1997; Hanks 1992; Hartman 2007). It is no wonder that feminist scholars have carefully scrutinized women’s positions within these traditions, with research questioning how women navigate the restraints posed by their religious beliefs (Burke 2012). Studies show that women, far from being duped by religion as common stereotypes may suggest, have an impressive range of choices within their religious lives: how women find multiple ways to comply with religious teachings (Avishai 2008); how they resist or challenge particularly stifling aspects of their religions (Katzenstein 1998); and how they find empowerment and nonreligious advantages by participating in their religions (Bartkowski and Read 2003; Chong 2008). But men’s lived experiences in the same communities have received considerably less attention by feminist and queer scholars.

This lack of interest in religious men, we contend, is the result of two trends within studies of religion. First, literature on men’s experiences tends not to critically interrogate the role of gender and masculinity in religious persons’ lives. Although studies focusing on men dominated scholarship on religion until recent decades, such studies did not advance our understanding of how men’s positions within religious communities are learned, enacted, or challenged. Second, feminist scholarship that counters the male focus within the academy by concentrating on women’s experiences tends to cast men as one-dimensional patriarchs, since men benefit from male privilege no matter their unique choices within and understandings about the world (Braude 1997). There are exceptions to these trends, but these lines of research tend to focus on minority men’s positioning within religious traditions, not men who appear in line with ideals of masculinity: white, middle class, heterosexual, and Christian (Pitt 2010; Sumerau 2012).

In this article, we examine religious masculinity through a feminist lens by identifying the ways in which some evangelical and Latter-Day

Saint (LDS) men understand their masculinity within their spiritual beliefs.<sup>1</sup> We draw from two unique case studies—an ethnography of Latter-Day Saints living in Utah and New England and a virtual ethnography of evangelicals who use online message boards and blogs to discuss sexuality in marriage. Our findings show how these men's lived experiences are complex and often do not fit the ideals of their traditions. Especially when it comes to sexual encounters, religion and spirituality are embedded in how contestations over masculinity play out. We argue specifically that men confront expectations surrounding marital intimacy in distinctly gendered ways, asserting their religious masculinities despite sexual obstacles. By looking to how some evangelical and Mormon men make sense of masculinity, we contribute to a growing body of research connecting gender and religion scholarship. We explain religious phenomena by investigating masculinity and heterosexuality, both understudied topics within this literature.

Evangelicals and Latter-Day Saints believe in ontological differences between men and women and that men are to have a strong work ethic and to be leaders in the home and at church, virtues thought to be based on God's design. It is widely accepted that if men strive to live up to Jesus' example as *the* divine man, they will receive God's approval. Both traditions agree that though manhood is not easy, it is a rewarding and godly pursuit. Religious men, then, must make sense of this task—being godly men. Part of being godly men is engaging in the right kind of sex at the right time in life. While evangelicals and Latter-Day Saints oppose premarital and extramarital sex and homosexuality, they view sex positively in the context of heterosexual, marital relationships (Erzen 2006; Gardner 2011; Gerber 2011; Holman and Harding 1996; Phillips 2005). In fact, religious teachings encourage sexual intimacy so that couples can deepen their relationship to one another and to God. Neither tradition limits sexual experiences to reproductive pursuits, leaving couples with the freedom to develop “healthy” sexual relationships that include pleasure and exploration

1. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is the official name for what is commonly referred to as the Mormon Church. Throughout this article, we use the official name of the church, the acronym “LDS” to refer to the church, and the common name, the Mormon Church. In reference to members of the church, we use Mormons and Latter-Day Saints interchangeably.

(DeRogatis 2005; Proctor 2003). We find that evangelical and LDS men support a belief in men's headship and believe that God wants them to have satisfying sex; yet within their intimate relationships, they often struggle to negotiate these expectations. We examine how men confront two situations that may seem to reduce their masculinity and dominant status: being rejected by their wives in their sexual advances and feeling sexually indifferent themselves. We show how these men transform these situations into manhood acts, what we call *acceptance of sexual rejection* and *sexual indifference*, to allow them to simultaneously challenge and uphold the system of hegemonic masculinity that their traditions promote.

### **Doing Religion, Doing Masculinity**

Scholars of religion increasingly ground their research in everyday experiences and talk in order to understand how individuals recreate, transform, and challenge religious institutions (Ammerman 2006; Hall 1997; McGuire 2008). Through this analysis of *lived religion* we see how people actively construct their religious identity, how they *do religion*. "Doing religion," Avishai (2008:413) writes, "is a mode of conduct and being, a performance of identity." Though theology and belief is important, religion does not exist outside of the ways in which believers live out their faith, how they express and experience religion in their lives (McGuire 2008). Furthermore, lived religion differs, sometimes in substantial ways, from formal doctrine or expressed beliefs. When it comes to understanding gender, scholars have noted the ways "symbolically traditionalism" exists alongside "pragmatic egalitarianism," wherein married couples support traditional gender roles but also have lives—men changing diapers and women working outside the home—that may challenge those roles (Gallagher and Smith 1999).

Just as religion is socially constructed through practice and discourse, so too does gender rely on actions, gestures, and appearances in order to be meaningful in the social world. This means that hegemonic masculinity is not a trait inherent in all men, but rather a socially constructed male *practice* that, when engaged in collectively, works to subordinate women (Carrigan, Connell, and John 1985; Connell 1995). What Schrock and Schwalbe (2009:279) call "manhood acts" require men to convincingly perform "a set of conventional

signifying practices through which the identity ‘man’ is established and upheld in interaction.” Manhood acts may *or may not* be hegemonic, but men benefit from male privilege even if they do not perfectly embody hegemonic masculinity, a benefit that Connell (1995:79) calls the patriarchal dividend. Although masculine practices are constructed in a cultural context and change over time and from place to place, central to manhood acts is the ability to assert control over others, cementing gender inequality.

Sexuality is implicated in manhood acts since hegemonic masculinity depends upon heterosexuality to maintain gender imbalances between men and women. Doing gender implies not only who you should be, according to normative standards about femininity and masculinity, but also who and how you should want or desire sexually (Butler 1990; Kimmel 2005; Jackson 2006). For men, heterosexual desire cements differences between themselves and women. As Schippers (2007:91) writes, “masculinity and femininity provide the hegemonic scaffolding for the relationships between men and women as ‘naturally’ and inevitably a relationship of dominance and submission.” Heterosexuality symbolizes imbalanced differences between men and women and therefore reinforces male privilege.

Religion, like heterosexuality, provides a platform with which men can justify manhood acts. In contemporary America, Protestant Christianity, hegemonic masculinity, and heterosexuality are often mutually confirming, wherein each bolsters a particular ideal of manhood while excluding subordinate forms. Research that examines the relationship between religion and manhood acts has focused on the ways in which subordinate men—gay men or men of color—use manhood acts to assert their control of others and maintain a status of dominance. These men emphasize *parts* of their identities that align with hegemonic masculinity and Christian ideals (McQueeney 2009). For example, in a study of an LGBT-affirming Christian church, Sumerau (2012) finds that gay men exaggerate rationality, emotional control, and paternal stewardship to legitimize their manhood within a Christian setting. We extend this scholarship on subordinate masculinity, manhood acts, and religion by investigating men who appear to more closely align with hegemonic masculine ideals.

There is relatively little written about how men in gender-traditional religions enact multiple masculinities. Though sociologists of religion have begun to ask questions about masculinity and manhood acts

within the context of gender-traditional religions, until recently most of this has focused on evangelicals, particularly on the Promise Keepers movement and ex-gay ministries. Both movements attempt instruction for godly masculinity given a contemporary cultural context where gender roles appear increasingly flexible. Scholarly inquiry around these movements has emphasized the masculinity politics at play.

Studies of Promise Keepers have mostly examined official texts and rhetoric of the movement, describing it as an “organized and highly politicized antifeminist and antigay backlash” (Messner 1997:35). Although their goal is to reestablish men as authorities within their families and communities, Promise Keepers’ depictions of masculinity are creative and nuanced. By emphasizing responsible fatherhood and “godly manhood,” these men became more expressive and caring, which in turn transformed their notions of masculinity to a “kinder, gentler patriarchy” (Kimmel 1999:114–15). Studies of official rhetoric led analysts to give unambiguous verdicts that the Promise Keepers are essentially an anti-feminist patriarchy, while ethnographic study uncovered more nuances (Bartkowski 2001; Heath 2003; Wilcox 2004). For example, while the men in Heath’s study admitted their mistakes (specifically in their relationships with their wives) and sought to make changes in their lives on an interactional and personal level, they were unwilling to grapple with the “structural conditions which undergird their privilege” (2003:440). Promise Keepers simultaneously worked to become more “sensitive husbands,” while never losing control of the family. Promise Keepers effectively preserved a hierarchical and authoritarian understanding of gender relations.

On the surface, the evangelical ex-gay movement shares many similarities with Promise Keepers in its unequivocal effort to bolster heterosexual masculinity within evangelicalism. Yet, ex-gay therapy promotes the idea of sexual fluidity, that sexual change is possible, and that there is space beyond the narrow identity categories of heterosexual and homosexual (Ezren 2006; Gerber 2011). The various groups that comprise this movement—most notably Exodus International, an organization that is now defunct—grapple with the meaning of masculinity in complex ways.<sup>2</sup> Ex-gays do not demonize same-sex attraction

2. The president of Exodus International, Alan Chambers, issued an apology for the ministry’s practices and any harm caused to the LGBT community. Following this statement, the ministry ended its “reparative therapy” but Chambers continues to vocalize his belief that God condemns homosexuality. Exodus International officially closed in 2013.

but instead encourage open communication about their feelings and desires to reconcile the conflict between their sexual thoughts and their religious beliefs. Like the Promise Keepers, ex-gay ministries have made possible new conversations among men about intimate issues, including sex. The ex-gay movement allows men who fail to embody the heterosexual standards of hegemonic masculinity to be accepted within a Christian framework (Wolkomir 2006). This is actually quite similar to strategies used by LGBT Christians who may support Christian ideals like monogamy and traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity in order to present themselves as “good Christians” who fall outside of the heterosexual norm (McQuee-ney 2009). These studies on sexual minorities—whether gay or ex-gay—show how gender and sexuality are distinct categories of analysis and how sexual transgression may exist alongside gender inequality. Challenging sexual norms does not necessarily equate to challenging male privilege and women’s subordination.

Our study uses the insight from scholars working at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and religion to better understand masculinity in conservative religions. We take up where these studies leave off, contending that scholars must critically investigate forms of masculinity that are firmly centered within America’s sense of “normal”—heterosexual Christian patriarchs—in order to fully understand these intersections. We look to discussions about sex, which are largely left out of scholarly narratives of religious men (Krondorfer 2010), to further disentangle the relationship between religion, masculinity, and heterosexuality. Our framework ties together what are often distinct threads in the sociology of religion and sociology of gender.

## **Data and Methods**

In order to expand theories of masculinities to include the experiences of conservative religious men, we draw from two cases: evangelical men who use Christian sexuality websites and single and married Latter-Day Saint men living in Utah and New England. Although our sample of evangelicals and Latter-Day Saints do not represent the experiences of *all* evangelicals or Mormons, examining men within these groups helps us to begin to understand how conservative religions impact men’s understandings of gender and sexuality. The experiences

of the men in our sample are specific to those who are white, generally middle class, and either are married or hope to become married. In short, these men embody multiple forms of privilege not afforded to many other religious men. Yet, it is precisely because these men experience racial and class privilege that they also confront pressures associated with “normal” expressions of masculinity, which have to do with race and class as well as gender and sexuality.

The data on evangelical men were gathered by Burke as part of a larger project on how evangelicals promote sexual pleasure within heterosexual marriages.<sup>3</sup> For this article, we focus on interview and content analysis data she collected between 2010 and 2011 from Christian sex advice books and Christian sexuality websites—message boards, online stores, and blogs that promote Christian marital intimacy. Burke conducted 24 interviews with evangelical users, 19 of whom were men, of *BetweenTheSheets.com* (BTS), a Christian message board that hosts hundreds of posts each day about topics related to marital sex with nearly 30,000 members.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to interviews, Burke conducted content analysis of a sample of 10 Christian sex advice books and 12 websites. While these sites and books are labeled broadly as “Christian,” each revealed distinctly evangelical tenets: belief that the Bible is the literal word of God and an emphasis on repentance and salvation through Jesus Christ alone (Balmer [1989] 2006; Greeley and Hout 2006). She collected data from *BetweenTheSheets.com* over a period of 2 years and in that time analyzed approximately 12,000 comments. Based on these and interview data, she created a dictionary of keyword search terms/phrases that guided additional content analysis on print literature and 11 additional sites. Search terms elicited debates and tensions over sex acts because disagreements are often where values are revealed and

3. This project is currently being developed further as a book under contract with the University of California Press.

4. All names of websites and their users are pseudonyms. Although websites are accessible to the public, we do not list them by name because this could identify users who participated in this study and were promised confidentiality. Because *BetweenTheSheets.com* requires membership in order to view all content on the site, Burke received permission from website administrators to analyze these data. Following the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham and Buchanan 2012), we quote and describe online content as anonymously as possible, changing details that may reveal the online identity of the author.

meaning-making takes place. Burke's sample is both similar to and different from evangelicals nationally and the general public.<sup>5</sup> Respondents are more likely than most Americans to use message boards and read blogs, perhaps supporting data that religious persons, on average, use the Internet more than nonreligious persons (Pew 2012). Like evangelicals nationally, they are likely to be married and have children; they are mostly white; and they are likely to reside in the American South, though men in the sample resided in regions across the United States. Compared with data collected from the National Survey of Family Growth, Burke's respondents are about twice as likely to have received a college degree than evangelicals nationally and they attend church services at higher rates (Centers for Disease Control 2012). Although it is difficult to gauge how many people use Christian sexuality websites and who they are, these are among the types of sites used by many Americans. Data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that about one in four American adults have at some point used an online chat room or online discussion forum, and as of 2010, about one in three Americans have used the Internet for information regarding religion or spirituality (Pew 2012). Christian sexuality sites are easy to find for anyone looking for online discussions about Christian sexuality.

Our understanding of Mormon men's experiences with sexuality comes out of data Moff Hudec gathered for a larger project that focuses on dating, courtship, and marriage in American Mormon communities. To unpack the relationship formation process for Mormons within a secular culture, she gathered ethnographic data in sites where that secular culture was more and less present: Utah and New England. Ethnography was chosen in this study because it gave a contextually rich and nuanced understanding of the daily experiences of an exclusive subset of society (Falzon 2009). She began by spending 2 years conducting research in two different Mormon wards (congregations) in New England and then spent 4 months studying three wards in Utah.

5. Seventeen of 19 male BTS users interviewed were affiliated with one of the following evangelical traditions: nondenominational, Assemblies of God, Baptist, and Pentecostal. We also label two respondents who self-identified as "Christian" as part of the religious group scholars call conservative Protestant evangelicals. As Putnam and Campbell (2010) found when asking people who attend a high-profile nondenominational (but widely identified as evangelical) church, they overwhelmingly labeled themselves as Christian.

In each location, she spent time observing church meetings, singles groups, dances, dinners, and talking informally with members. During the course of her fieldwork, she conducted formal interviews with 70 Latter-Day Saints, 26 of whom were men: 13 married and 13 unmarried. Respondents in this study tended to be highly active members of the church. Most were “temple-worthy” members, meaning they regularly attended church, lived up to LDS standards, and paid tithing. Though the interviews consisted mostly of conversation about experiences with dating and courtship in youth and in adulthood, the topic of sex often came up over the course of a 2-hour interview. Sexual sin (the use of pornography, masturbation, and premarital sex), successful strategies for remaining chaste before marriage, the transition to marital sexuality, and the efforts made to sexually satisfy spouses were common themes in interviews with both men and women.

Moff Hudec’s sample tended to be white, middle to upper class, and well educated. Respondents were more than twice as likely to have a college degree than Latter-Day Saints nationally. About 29 percent of American Mormons are college graduates; 9 percent of these go on to earn graduate degrees. In Moff Hudec’s sample, 70 percent of the men (18 of 26) had graduated from college, 27 percent (7 of 26) were currently in college, and 3 percent (1 of 26) had not attended college at all. Additionally, 27 percent of the men (7 of 26) were either in graduate school at the time of their interview or already held graduate degrees. Those who were married entered into the union earlier than the average American. According to the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, about 71 percent of Latter-Day Saints over age 18 in the United States are married, a figure significantly higher than the national total of 54 percent. The median age at first marriage in the general population is 25 years for women and 27 for men, whereas the median in the LDS community is 21 for women and 23 for men (Pew 2008).

We draw on our data from evangelical and LDS men to unpack how men from traditionally conservative religious communities apply their religious beliefs to their sexual practices, not to compare the experiences of evangelicals and Mormons. However, our differing approaches to gathering data led us to different kinds of information from each group. The data on evangelicals are unique in that they are protected by the anonymity of the Internet, and therefore provide a great amount of detail about actual sexual experiences and the emotions/reactions to those experiences. Data on Latter-Day Saints offer less detail about sexual encounters specifically

since these data were collected through in-person interviews (and continued interaction through participant observation), where respondents were less likely to speak candidly about sex. Respondents in both samples, however, were surprisingly open about their fears, joys, and insecurities around sexuality as well as their impressions of their sexual experiences. Though not comparable, both kinds of data help us to theorize about the intersection of masculinity, sexuality, and religion.

### **Religious Masculinities**

Marital sex is an important topic for both evangelicals and Mormons. As many sociologists of sexuality have pointed out, sex acts require social context—so people know how to interpret their bodies, thoughts, and emotions, and others' bodies and gestures (Gagnon and Simon 2005). Yet the social context for religious sexuality is complicated by the fact that evangelicals and Mormons both claim to reject all “worldly” social cues when it comes to sex. The LDS Church is a highly organized, hierarchical religious institution that disseminates these beliefs in official publications and statements made by leaders, one of whom—the living prophet and president—is thought to be the mouthpiece of God. The church has set strict standards that members are to live by in order to remain “worthy” (in good standing) and to ensure salvation. These standards help to regulate many aspects of members' lives. The “Law of Chastity” and “Celestial Marriage” doctrines, unique to the LDS Church, help to regulate sexual behavior in particular. Prior to entering an eternal bond, the message is simple—no sex, no masturbation, no pornography. Upon entering into a marital relationship, the message gets more complex. As Proctor explains in her 2003 article “Bodies, Babies, and Birth Control,” attitudes about marital sexual relationships vary greatly within the church. There is an official stance on the types of acts that are unacceptable in God's eyes (masturbation, mutual or otherwise, oral and anal intercourse, pornography) but there is also a sense that these matters are up to the couple's discretion (Proctor 2003). This confusion is mostly due to the fact that different authorities speak about these things in contradictory ways and, unlike other aspects of life, there is no specific easy-to-access list of what can and cannot be done in the confines of the marital sexual relationship.

Evangelical traditions, on the other hand, rely on more diffuse authority that includes a large network of authors and speakers, many of whom boast credentials as medical doctors, psychologists, therapists, and ordained ministers, to promote values on marital sex (Driscoll and Driscoll 2012; La Haye and La Haye 1976; Rosenau 2002). Through sex advice books, conferences and retreats, and websites, these evangelicals offer practical tips and relational advice when it comes to marital sexuality. Evangelicals who talk about marital sexuality in print and online spend little or no time justifying or debating theology about the privileged status of heterosexual, matrimonial, and monogamous sex. God approves of sex only if it takes place within this context. Not only does He approve of it, most evangelicals who write or talk about marital sex believe that God commands it. However, evangelicals believe sex should also be pleasurable and that good sex is a gift from God to be enjoyed by all married Christians. Because evangelicals emphasize individuals' personal relationships with God, they leave open a wide range of what is sexually possible for married, monogamous, heterosexual couples.

Despite the differing types of resources, evangelicals and Mormons alike use a similar set of beliefs to provide the framework by which they interpret their actions and experiences when it comes to sexuality. Both evangelicals and Latter-Day Saints believe that marriage is desirable for most (if not all) believers and that sex is an integral part of any marriage, for procreative purposes and to create a stronger bond between partners (and God). Yet, they also believe that gender is essential and that this fact dictates sexual desires and expectations. For example, in both traditions, it is assumed that women are less sexual than men—they do not physically *need* sex in the ways in which men do, they consider sex to be a primarily emotionally connective rather than physical act, and they think about it less often and struggle less with remaining chaste until marriage. Men, alternatively, are presumed to be much more sexual than women—they struggle to control their natural urge to have sex if they are not married, and require frequent sexual release within marriage. These assumptions burden both men and women with an expectation for sexual incompatibility within married relationships even though both religions stress the importance of regular sexual activity once a couple is married. For men specifically, the expectation that they are innately sexually aggressive but must deny their urges outside of marriage and learn to manage their urges within marriage often causes confusion

and anxiety. Our data show that it is when these sexual stereotypes meet the realities of everyday life that religious masculinities are constructed and evangelical and LDS men find ways to exhibit agency.

While gender-traditional religions specifically, and society at large, protect and value notions and ideals associated with masculinity, “doing masculinity” is complicated. In this section, we look to our cases of evangelical and LDS men to explore how they exhibit agency in the ways in which they perform, inhabit, and experience the sexual expectations of their religions. In particular, we focus on two types of manhood acts that appear to contradict religious beliefs about men’s innate sexual drives: *acceptance of sexual rejection* and *sexual indifference*. We show how these manhood acts do not undermine religious beliefs about male sexuality, but rather allow men who do not perfectly embody hegemonic Christian masculinity to nonetheless assert themselves as Christian men. Acceptance of sexual rejection and sexual indifference are present, at least in some ways, in both sets of data, though we do not claim that they are an exhaustive description of evangelical or LDS men or that they apply to men in all gender-traditional religions. Instead, we use these categories to complicate assumptions about masculinity and religious men.

### **Acceptance of Sexual Rejection as a Manhood Act**

When conservative religious men have a higher sex drive than their wives and their spouses frequently (or, in some cases, always) reject their attempts at sex, the hierarchical and authoritarian understanding of gender relations may be perceived to be under attack. While the existence of men who are sexually rejected by their wives is predictable in religious groups where it is believed that men’s sexual drives far exceed that of their wives, it is unacceptable given the importance placed on sexual activity within marriage. Even though church leaders do not emphasize women’s sexuality, there is an expectation among evangelicals and Latter-Day Saints that wives should find their husbands sexually appealing. But there is not a clear message in either tradition about what to do in cases of sexual rejection. When confronted with this situation, the men in our sample attempted to reinterpret masculinity by actively accepting sexual rejection. Their acceptance of sexual rejection, we contend, is a manhood act that allows men to reclaim control over their sexuality by viewing it as a spiritual test in

which they must show their devotion to God and the religious ideology of their faith tradition.

In these communities where men are dominant, consent becomes muddled (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Though evangelical leaders do not explicitly promote nonconsensual sex, there is an underlying expectation that women *will* and *should* have sex with their husbands. An evangelical blogger, Judy, writes to other Christian women on her site, WeddingNights.com: “Sexual intimacy is not optional for married couples.” That expectation, however, is not universal. Evangelical author Kevin Leman (2003:131) writes in a popular sex advice book: “Most men need to ‘dial it back’ a little bit. By that I mean stop expecting your wife to meet your sexual needs perfectly. Settle for improvement.” Unlike evangelicals who use websites and popular sex advice books to help them navigate their sexual lives, the LDS Church’s central authoritative body is often the only or most valued source of information about sex for its believers. But, the topic of consent in marital sex is one that has gone nearly unexamined by church leadership. The church is careful not to suggest that women should submit to their husbands sexually while also providing advice for men and women alike on how to ensure sexual satisfaction. The conflicting messages from the church are represented well in a talk given by Professor of Family Science at Brigham Young University, Brent Barlow, on the matter of intimacy in marriage (Barlow 1986). First, while discussing major causes of divorce, Barlow states, “some develop inappropriate attitudes from mistaken interpretations of biblical verses . . . . Some have erroneously believed that [Ephesians 5:22] means women are to submit or yield themselves to their husbands even if they do so unwillingly.” Then, later in the talk, while speaking directly to “the wife,” he says “few wives sense the degree of frustration and alienation husbands feel when a wife ignores his needs and interests. I believe a wise and loving Heavenly Father has given a wife the ability to achieve oneness with her husband. The key is unselfishness” (Barlow 1986).

Conflicting messages from both religious communities left the men in our sample to interpret these messages on their own. We found they generally support men’s headship and women’s submission, but prioritize consent when it comes to sexual activity. Therefore, men who are married to wives with a low sex drive learn to deal with infrequent sexual liaisons. For example, Colonel, the online username for an evangelical man who has had infrequent sexual encounters during

his 20 years of marriage, recalled in an interview, men must “love and respect their wives” and this means “not wanting sex all the time” and that men are to “control our desires/ lusts.” He explained that he “works hard” to accept his situation without succumbing to sin, like seeking an affair, viewing Internet pornography, or building up resentment. As a full-time employee in a demanding job and a father of four children, he emphasized how much effort it required for him to make time to stay engaged in the online BetweenTheSheets.com (BTS) community. It was important for him to do so because other BTS members provided support and accountability that Colonel acted in a Christian way. He emphasized the active nature of being rejected: sexual refusal meant that Colonel sought out Christian community in the form of BTS in order to maintain his status as a good Christian man. Similarly, Brian, a Latter-Day Saint father of four, spoke about his “responsibility to his wife.” In describing his wife’s low sex drive, he opened up about his “disgust for the submission stuff.” Never wanting to make his wife uncomfortable, Brian did not discuss with her how sexual rejection made him feel. Instead, he turned to his bishop, who he says “is very helpful” and lets him know that he is not alone.

While most men in our sample relied on a community or religious leader to accept rejection and to remain empowered as men, others took a different approach. An evangelical interview respondent, PaulQ, who was sexually refused by his wife, insisted that he valued his wife’s consent, but described how their intimate life involved her submission to his sexual demands. As he explained,

My wife NEVER initiates sex. What works for her is that I initiate 100% of the time. I never ask her for sex, because if I did her answer would always be no. So instead when I want sex I tell her we are going to have sex. That’s the way she likes it. She said that by my no longer asking, a weight feels like it has been lifted from her shoulders, and she likes it when I just “take” her. That way she doesn’t have to think about it.

Despite their sexual arrangement, PaulQ continued to feel rejected, wishing that his wife would express an interest in sex: “I would LOVE it if she would initiate it.” He regularly read message board threads geared toward men who have spouses with low sexual drives, and considers it a burden to have to juggle how frequently to initiate sex. He reported that he never initiates sex more than two to three times each month even though he would like to have sex more frequently. Yet instead of discussing how being rejected feels emasculating, PaulQ

described sexual refusal as a burden of constraint that he must actively work to achieve, thereby maintaining control over the situation and preserving his manhood.

In order to cope with their situations, some sexually rejected evangelical and Latter-Day Saint men rationalize that the lack of sexual activity in their marriage is a spiritual test in which they must show their devotion to God and the religious ideologies of their community. In other words, their masculinity is defined by the men's commitment to Christ rather than in relation to women. As Kimmel (1999:129) has argued, "masculinity is a homosocial enactment, we test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood." For our respondents, God was the ultimate male figure who could grant them their manhood. Thus, attention was directed to their spiritual life. For example, members of BTS encourage sexually refused men to look to God for answers to their situation if their spouse is unwilling (or unable) to change. One member says this to a sexually refused man:

If she . . . is an otherwise loving and generous wife, I'm sure she isn't purposely withholding desire from you. Women's bodies don't respond as quickly or forcefully as a man's . . . . Do you feel inadequate? Do you feel like your manliness has taken a blow? If so . . . it is your job to take your feelings to God and heal your own heart.

Rather than emphasizing God's power to change people's circumstances, this website user places the responsibility of action ("healing the heart") on the sexually rejected man, who must use his relationship with God in order to negotiate his situation.

Alex, an LDS man who had been married just a little under a year and whose wife was pregnant at the time of our interview, spoke repeatedly about the few number of times he had actually had sex. As an orthodox Mormon who believes strongly in the doctrine of celestial marriage, remaining chaste before marriage was essential to his plan of salvation. Marrying at the age of 27, a couple years later than the average Mormon man, Alex was "very ready to do it." He was disappointed with how difficult it was in the beginning to "get started" and was even more disheartened when his wife got pregnant very quickly and promptly became "disinterested" in sex.

As hard as it is sometimes to not get it after all these years, I know that [Gina] is just dealing with the pregnancy this way. She will want to do

it again someday. I mean we'll want more kids someday, right? That's a reason at least.

When asked about other sexual experiences before or during his marriage, Alex laughed and said, "no. Why would I? I stayed a virgin all these years so I could be married in the temple . . . and I'm not so desperate that I need to ruin my marriage." For Alex, rejection from his wife was not reason enough to deviate from the ideology he had long lived by, nor did it indicate anything to him about his own masculinity. The act of accepting his wife's disinterest in sex was an extension of his work as a good Mormon and head of his household. Alex went on to say, "when I think about my life, I don't just think about sex. I think about the family we are creating and what kind of father I will be." For Alex, sex was only a small part of his experience of masculinity. He saw rejection as part of his religious narrative that kept him in a position of power. He may not be engaging in sexual relations as often as he would like, but he will fulfill his "duty" as an ideal Mormon man—as a father and the priesthood holder for his family.

For both evangelicals and Mormons, there is a sense that rejected men need to be proactive to make their marital sexual relationships all they desire them to be. Accepting sexual rejection, then, is an active state of being: working to better the marital relationship; maintaining their position as the head of the household; avoiding sinful sexual acts; and working to become closer to God and earn his approval.

### **Sexual Indifference as a Manhood Act**

While sexual rejection is seen as a common, almost predictable practice to be faced by men, sexual indifference is unexpected because of the culturally constructed expectations for men's sexual desires. We found, however, that in the cases of Latter-Day Saints and evangelicals, it was not unlikely for men to experience indifference when it came to sex. That is, it was not uncommon for men to have a lower sex drive than their wives. Given the association of masculinity with hyper-sexuality, these men had to find other ways to reinforce their religious masculinity.

The cultural assumptions about men's sex drives are so deeply embedded in these two religious communities that men and women alike in our sample described being confused by the sexual indifference of

men. Thomas, a young, recently married LDS man, said that though he did not spend a lot of time talking about sex with his Mormon friends, he knew “they would agree that men are more sexual.” This narrative begins early in the LDS Church when the young men are warned about the dangers of sexual impurities. Though both are expected to remain chaste before marriage, church leaders are more concerned with the sexual urges of boys than girls. For evangelicals, boys are seen as biologically weak and more susceptible to sexual temptations. Even within the BTS online community, men with low sex drives are thought to be the exception rather than the rule. This is well illustrated by Sunshine, a female user of the site, who recalled in her interview having shared her story of wanting sex more than her husband and having been accused of being a “man” by another website user. Experiencing sexual indifference as a man who relies on a religious script, which is predicated on innate sexual urges, can be especially problematic. The men in our sample, however, have come up with unique ways to negotiate their masculine and spiritual identities by attempting to find medical explanations for their lack of interest in sex, blaming past sexual transgressions, and giving up sexual control completely to their spouse. Throughout the management of their own indifference, these men emphasize self-control and self-development as a means of remaining masculine in the eyes of those around them.

Men who are sexually indifferent and who use evangelical sexuality websites seek explanations that are outside of their control in order to justify their lack of interest in sex. The very act of looking for an explanation for a low sexual drive is described as masculine. On the topic of low testosterone (the presumed cause of many men’s low sexual drive), for example, one BTS member writes: “most guys that are low in testosterone don’t care and don’t want to get anything done about it. Hats off to you [another BTS member who recently found out his testosterone level] for pursuing this.” Website users most frequently look to medical reasons why a man may not be interested in sex. As one user reasons about a newly married man’s lack of sexual interest: it is a “sign that something is very wrong with hormone levels.” Similarly, a long-time member of BTS, began his interview by explaining that he joined the site to find solutions for erectile dysfunction (ED), which forced him to have sex less often than he would have liked. His struggles with ED did not elicit talk of shame or defeat, but were framed as a medical problem that required perseverance and creative

solutions on behalf of him and his wife. Samwise believed that he and his wife talk about sex now more than ever before in their marriage, and he recommends BTS to his Christian friends and his adult children. He explained that since finding BTS,

[my wife] is often open to discussion on the things I have learned. I think that she actually is enjoying the fact that I take the lead on these discussions. I have come to feel pretty confident talking with her about any aspect of our relationship and I think she has come to understand more fully that I really do care about her well being in our relationship.

While ED caused problems in their sexual relationship that made it seem as if Samwise did not care enough about his marriage, Samwise has learned to reframe his sexual indifference in a way that bolsters his status as a confident and caring husband.

In addition to medical justification, some men in our sample blamed a sinful past for causing emotional or physical damage that prohibits a man from being interested in sex with his wife. Pornography, for example, corrupts men's ideas about women and confuses how sex should take place within Christian marriages. These men use their past addiction to pornography or other sexual transgressions to construct compelling redemption stories in which they incorporate agency into their reformed actions. Leonard, for example, an LDS man, opened up at the end of our interview saying: "sex is a hard thing to get used to. I know it's great and the church even promotes a healthy sex life for us but I just feel torn about it. I have desires, I love my wife but I worry that I can't control myself, so I kind of avoid it." In this case, Leonard had been exposed to more sexual variety (through pornography) but struggled with the knowledge that this was "not healthy." The disconnection between what was acceptable within the religious context and what he desired left him feeling uncomfortable with sex in his marriage altogether. His indifference to sex is a response to his fear of not being able to control his sexual desires that were informed by "sinful" content. By avoiding these desires, Leonard was preserving his religious masculinity, which expects men to live up to the standards of the religious community, namely, not being a sexual deviant. Self-control, in his case, is masculine.

Instead of finding external explanations to justify sexual indifference, another approach of dealing with a low sex drive is simple acceptance. Donald, for example, a 30-year-old Latter-Day Saint who

had been married for 3 years, said in his interview, “it is just weird, I’m supposed to be the one who leads in the bedroom, I’m supposed to make it exciting but I can’t, it just doesn’t feel right to me. It ends up that [Lena] does all the initiating, I just go along.” For Donald, his loss of control due to his lack of desire made him indifferent about the whole process. As he saw it, he had gone for so long without sex that it did not even matter to him whether or not he had it. By accepting his low sex drive and not trying to change it, Donald challenged ideal Mormon masculinity. His wife, however, was not willing to give up the marital sex she was promised when entering into an eternal marriage with Donald. She became more invested in her marital sexual relationship. Donald then moved even further outside the gender hegemony his religious tradition promotes by “give[ing] her the power” in the bedroom. Donald then began to expect his wife to be the initiator. This allowed him to redefine his indifference. Instead of being about his lack of control, it was about his own self-development.

Residing in the space between innate sexual aggression and practiced sexual restraint prior to marriage, LDS men expressed losing sight of their own role within married sex. Because LDS men are challenged to maintain their own chastity even into their 20s and 30s (an ideal that is unheard of in secular society), their relationship to women and thus to sexuality in general seems to be negatively affected. This is seen in Pascoe’s (2007:112) discussion of the effects of religion on young men’s experience with masculinity. She argues that Christian boys draw upon “masculinizing discourses of self control and maturity . . . . [They] exercise will and mastery, not over girls’ bodies, but over their own by waiting to have sex.” For the Mormon men in our sample, being taught to remain pure while young women are desexualized affects their own comfort levels with sex.

Men, though receiving the same overall message about sex from the church and within the Mormon culture, were more likely to take in messages about hegemonic masculinity from the larger culture. Thus, men internalized the idea that they are supposed to be sexual, making them more aware of what is in store for them when entering a marital relationship. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to fear the first sexual experience (the wedding night). But the more interesting story is what seems to happen later in the marriage, after the initial transition to a sexual relationship. While the Mormon women in our sample reported becoming more confident in their sex

lives as time went on, men's anxiety about the topic increased greatly with time. In some men, this led to sexual indifference in marriage.

Sexual indifference seems to challenge the system of hegemonic masculinity of both evangelicalism and Mormonism simply by going against prevalent stereotypes about men's innate sexual aggression. However, these men's responses to their own sexual indifference also uphold this system as they work to find other ways to demonstrate their masculinity. Whether it is framing their indifference as a problem, handing over control of their sexual lives to their wives, or simply avoiding sex altogether, they are actively engaging in manhood acts that maintain their identity as men.

## Conclusions

The experiences of men in gender-traditional religions are complex, at times inconsistent, and not necessarily the direct result of religious teachings. *Acceptance of sexual rejection* and *sexual indifference* represent manhood acts that allow men to simultaneously resist the systematic hegemonic masculinity promoted by their religions while conforming to their religious beliefs. Both actions uphold beliefs about men's control within their relationships, but they also challenge norms associated with how men are supposed to be sexual. Our findings indicate that even those who are privileged by their gender are working toward constructing new notions of masculinity while also maintaining old ones. Like past research on masculinity and religion, our respondents give lip service to masculinity transformed—learning to accept their sexual situations that fall outside of traditional understandings of marriage—but do not fundamentally alter gendered power within their relationships, continually upholding their positions of control (McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012).

Our respondents acknowledged that accepting sexual rejection and sexual indifference placed them outside of the norms of religious masculinity and found other ways to live up to the expectations of their religions. We contend that acceptance of sexual rejection and sexual indifference both deviate from religious expectations about gender and sexuality, but also rationalize men's experiences in ways that actually reinforce those expectations. In other words, although men who exhibit these practices do not represent an "ideal type" of Christian

manhood, they continue to recreate this ideal type by framing their experiences in ways that bolster their spiritual and masculine identities. These evangelical and LDS men draw from themes related to self-control and empowerment through religious devotion to maintain their dominant status as Christian patriarchs. Importantly, they show that the structure of dominance persists despite some chipping away at its foundation. As other research shows about manhood acts, these practices offer nuance to men's actions while bolstering male privilege (Schrock and Scwalbe 2009).

Examining religious masculinities offers two important contributions to existing scholarship. First, it pushes us to consider the complexity of male privilege. Like women within these same communities, religious men are constantly negotiating gender and sexual expression with their spiritual beliefs and practices. "Multiple masculinities" have developed in these religious communities, rather than a single definition of manhood (Carrigan, Connell, and John 1985). In other words, men's notions of gender and sexuality are not concrete; masculinities are constantly changing even as the official religious beliefs about men change very slowly or not at all. In order to maintain the power they hold within their gender-traditional religions, religious men attempt to live up to the expectations set forth for them by religious authorities and the community around them. Yet, these men also resist those expectations as they recognize how difficult it is to live up to the popular belief that masculinity is a fixed position. In their struggle to understand themselves as sexual beings, they are made aware of the problematic nature of masculinity and the contradictions inherent in male privilege.

Second, our findings suggest that *heterosexuality* needs to be critically integrated into the study of religion. Sociologists of religion who study sexuality tend to focus on marginalized sexual identities, specifically homosexuality. This literature explores the negotiation of religious and sexual identities among lesbian, gay, and transgender men and women, and explores organized religions' exclusionary practices against LGBT individuals (McQueeney 2009; Pitt 2010; Sumerau 2012; Thumma and Gray 2005; Valentine and Waite 2012; Wilcox 2003). Scholarship would benefit from applying the theoretical framework of these studies—that sexuality is influenced by a variety of social forces, including religion—to heterosexuality. Even though heterosexuality is taken-for-granted in contemporary society, it is actually

continually constructed, defined, and defended through social institutions and everyday practices (Jackson 2006). Examining heterosexuality within the context of conservative religions sheds light on relationships between men and women and on how heterosexuality is naturalized within a religious framework.

We implore others to extend the conversation on religious men's everyday lives, in sexual and nonsexual circumstances. More work needs to be done at the intersection of masculinity, sexuality, and religion to understand how religious men try to live up to the system of hegemonic masculinity. We point to the moments when creative, interpretative work helps religious men to reconcile their experiences with religious expectations and to alleviate the tensions they face in their everyday lives. And through this work, we find evidence of the resilience of gender inequality and men's control. Examining religious masculinities makes gender and sexuality central to the study of religion and makes religion central to the study of gender and sexuality.

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