

SEX

When Spirituality and Sexuality Clash

Research suggests that sexual thoughts can weaken spiritual motivations.

Posted June 17, 2017



This post is in response to **Are Sex And Religion Natural Enemies?** By Scott A. McGreal MSc.

In a previous [article](#), I proposed that sexual and religious impulses may be naturally antagonistic, and perhaps this might explain why so many traditional religions have had such negative attitudes towards sex. Recent research provides new evidence that thinking about sex could diminish spiritual/religious motivations, at least in some respects, suggesting that even though many people in modern secular societies think of sexuality and spirituality as compatible, there is still enough tension between them that integrating the two might be more difficult than people might think.

In my earlier article, I discussed a possible antagonism between sexual thoughts and religious belief, at least in traditional Abrahamic religions. This was based on (supposed) research findings that sexual thoughts tend to promote a more concrete mental processing style, while religious ideas seem to rely on a more global mental processing style (Förster, Epstude, & Özelsel, 2009; however, please note that this paper has since been [retracted](#)¹). Concrete mental processing may be more conducive to analytical thinking than a global style, and other research

belief. I admit that these ideas were highly speculative and have not yet been confirmed. However, more recent research (Rigo, Uzarevic, & Saroglou, 2016) provides more direct evidence that thinking about sexual experiences can weaken religious and/or spiritual impulses in at least some respects, although the specific mechanisms may be different from the ones I discussed.



Spirituality and sexuality: friends or foes?

Source: Scot A Harvest

The authors of the study discuss several reasons why sexuality and spirituality could be antagonistic. The reasons discussed include that focusing on sexual experiences tends to heighten attention to one's own gratification and pleasure, whereas

religious/spiritual thinking tends to emphasize focusing on concerns beyond oneself. Additionally, religious/spiritual traditions have traditionally emphasized maintaining control over one's impulses, whereas focusing on one's sexuality is more likely to involve a loss of inhibitions. Additionally, religious/spiritual thinking tends to heighten one's sense of disgust owing to an emphasis on the importance of maintaining a sense of purity, whereas becoming sexually aroused tends to weaken a person's sense of disgust. Hence, sexuality and spirituality tend to involve conflicting impulses.

The authors tested their ideas in three online experiments in all of which young adults were asked to recall a recent sexual experience, while control group participants recalled a non-sexual experience, such as going to a movie. (Only the first two experiments specifically concerned spirituality; as the third

that people considered the relevant destinations to be spiritual compared to the other destinations.) Results showed that people who had thought about a recent sexual experience were less motivated to visit spiritual destinations compared to the control group. Thinking about sex had no effect on motivation to visit more secular destinations. Interestingly, in study 1, the results were affected by participants' levels of disinhibition (a person's willingness to lose their inhibitions, e.g. by getting drunk or high), a trait which is related to self-control. Specifically, thinking about sex decreased motivation to travel to a "spiritual" destination only in those who were high, but not those low in disinhibition. This suggests that in people low in disinhibition, who presumably value self-control, sexual thoughts do not affect their "spiritual" motivations. In experiment 2, the authors looked at whether sexual thoughts could also increase disinhibition, and found that this occurred in women but not men. I find this result very surprising, because disinhibition is a stable personality trait that is supposed to be stable over time. However, contrary to study 1, disinhibition did not affect willingness to travel to a "spiritual" destination.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

the physical world for example?

The research raises questions concerning the effect of disinhibition on spiritual motivation, as the two studies produced conflicting results: Study 1 found that disinhibition decreased intention to travel to a spiritual destination, at least in women, while study 2 found no such effect. Additionally, in study 2 there was the very surprising result that thinking about sex increased disinhibition, at least in women. The scale used to measure disinhibition includes items assessing one's attitudes to things like going to wild parties, enjoying the company of swingers, and how much one enjoys getting high on drugs or drunk on alcohol. To be honest, I find it hard to believe that simply thinking about a recent sexual experience could have really affect such things, and suspect this result might be a fluke. On the other hand, it seems plausible that features of personality related to self-control, like disinhibition could have some influence on how a person responds to sexual thoughts, as the authors of this study suggest. It would be interesting to explore this topic further to see if these effects can be replicated.

The authors of this study note that for some people at least, sex can have a self-transcendent aspect that allows them to have experiences they consider to be of a spiritual nature. However, the results of their experiments suggest that for most people thinking about a sexual experience may weaken their spiritual interests. Perhaps, reconciling sexuality and spirituality requires special skills and attitudes that many people do not have? Another recent study found that the more pornography people

much of a problem for heavy viewers. The reasons for this are far from clear, but the author of this study speculated that heavy users of pornography may have found a way to rationalize their behavior and enjoy it without apparent guilt without it interfering with their religious commitments. Perhaps these people find a way to keep their interest in sexually explicit material and their spiritual impulses compartmentalized. Another intriguing possibility is that they find some way to combine the two, and may even perceive a spiritual aspect in pornography? If this is true, it would be very interesting to know how they manage to reconcile these two aspects of their lives, particularly when so many people experience such conflict and struggle between their sexual and spiritual impulses.

THE BASICS

The Fundamentals of Sex

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Note

¹ I was unaware at the time that I wrote the present blog post that the paper by Förster et al. had been retracted. I have amended my previous [article](#) to note this.

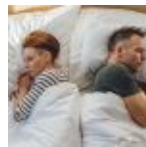
References

Förster, J., Epstude, K., & Özelsel, A. (2009). Why Love Has Wings and Sex Has Not: How Reminders of Love and Sex Influence Creative and Analytic Thinking. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35(11), 1479-1491. doi:10.1177/0146167209342755 (*Note: this paper has since been [retracted](#).*)

SEX ESSENTIAL READS



**The Real Reasons
Why People Have
Affairs**



**When Partners
Stop Having Sex,
Whose Choice Is
It?**

Pennycook, G., Cheyne, J. A., Seli, P., Koehler, D. J., & Fugelsang, J. A. (2012). Analytic cognitive style predicts religious and paranormal belief. *Cognition*, 123(3), 335-346. doi:10.1016/j.cognition.2012.03.003

Perry, S. L. (2017). Does Viewing Pornography Diminish Religiosity Over Time? Evidence From Two-Wave Panel Data. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 54(2), 214-226. doi:10.1080/00224499.2016.1146203

Rigo, C., Uzarevic, F., & Saroglou, V. (2016). Make Love and Lose Your Religion and Virtue: Recalling Sexual Experiences Undermines Spiritual Intentions and

About the Author



Scott McGreal is a psychology researcher with a particular interest in individual differences, especially in personality and intelligence.

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