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ADDICTED TO LUST: PORNOGRAPHY IN THE LIVES OF CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTS

Samuel L. Perry

266 pages; Oxford University Press; 2019

\$29.95

When people thought about or sought out pornography 30 or more years ago, say, their choices were mostly magazines and films.

The feral internet has changed that. Now, no matter how you define porn, it's immediately available online because of what Perry calls "the cultural and technological tidal wave that has ... placed limitless, free, anonymous porn into the hands of every Christian with a smartphone."

It turns out that the one group of religious people most affected by this flood may be those who identify as evangelical, or conservative, Protestants, a group that, prior to the internet, hallucinated that it would be possible to shut down the porn industry. The author, who teaches sociology and religious studies at the University of Oklahoma, tries in this new book to explain what makes them so vulnerable.

It's a well-researched work that raises questions for people of all faith traditions. It's also annoyingly repetitive, as Perry frequently summarizes interviews he's just quoted, often using the same words. So readers who want to understand the many social and religious issues associated with porn will need to wade through more than they should have to — like almost 20 pages on masturbation, including this question from a Baptist pastor in Tennessee: "[D]id Jesus masturbate?"

Perry conducted lots of interviews, and they make up the most interesting part of this work in that we get to hear from real humans who've been using pornography and who are wrestling with feelings of guilt and sin because of it.

"[D]espite their essentially unanimous moral rejection of pornography use, conservative Protestants ... view pornography only slightly less often than other Americans," Perry writes. This results in "moral incongruence," he says, because those Protestants rank sexual sin as among the worst and most damaging of all sins. This "sexual exceptionalism," he writes, "lies at the core of the torment experienced by" conservative Protestants. They often believe deeply that if they can't master their porn use they will be punished in hell for all eternity.

Pornography used to be an issue these Protestants thought was outside the church. Now they recognize that they're also part of the online world where it's easily available. Indeed, what Perry calls an entire "cottage industry" has grown up to help porn users through monitoring devices, blocking systems, accountability software and small groups. If porn has produced lots of jobs, so has anti-porn.

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Because of their theology, Perry argues, conservative Protestants find that porn is "uniquely damaging to their mental health, spiritual lives and families."

And it's often even worse for the women among them because of the common but suspect idea that women are much less interested in physical relationships than in emotional ones. This means many women who feel addicted to porn have no one in their faith community from whom they feel comfortable seeking help.

Another problem conservative Protestants face in thinking about pornography is what Perry calls a "weak theology of the body." In separating body from soul or spirit, the value of the body gets downgraded and, thus, satisfying its needs and desires becomes more sinful and less spiritual. Indeed, the idea that body and spirit shouldn't be falsely separated, which Christianity learned from Judaism, is the foundation of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. But a kind of gnostic disgust for the body has wormed its way into conservative Protestant theology, adding to the moral incongruence when men and women use porn to satisfy bodily desires. It leads to self-loathing, which is always trouble.

When sexual sin, including porn use, is seen as what Perry calls "the most corrupting and damnable of all sins" — more so than anger, greed, selfishness, racism or envy — the chances of dealing with it rationally and successfully are limited.

So what's the answer? Like any good researcher, Perry thinks more research is needed.

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