

Forbidden Fruit



SEX & RELIGION
in the LIVES of
AMERICAN TEENAGERS

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INTRODUCTION

If there is a developmental trajectory for anything during adolescence, it is sex. Nothing—not smoking, drinking, drug use, nor any form of delinquency—compares to the rapid commencement of paired sexual practices during the latter half of adolescence. In an average day, at least 7,000 American teenagers experience sexual intercourse for the first time.¹ Nearly every human being finds his or her way to it eventually, but few have by age 13 and most have before the age of 20. Some do so unwillingly. Without analyzing any data on adolescent sex, it is obvious that something significant is going on developmentally, biologically, socially, and culturally to make sexual intercourse attractive enough that roughly one-third to one-half of all young Americans try it for the first time—in spite of its physical and emotional risks—within the span of about two to three years (between ages 16 and 18).

Numbers do not help us to properly interpret and understand adolescent sexuality today. Media accounts of teenagers' sexual attitudes, motivations, and behavior do not always clarify matters. One could conclude from several recent news features that today's adolescents are much more into oral sex than ever before (Halpern-Felsher et al. 2005), that abstinence pledgers are more likely to have anal sex than those who don't pledge (Connolly in the *Washington Post*, March 19, 2005), that there is a trend toward bisexuality among high school girls (Irvine on "CBS News," September 16, 2005), or that we have actually overestimated just how sexualized adolescents really are (Brooks in the *New York Times*, April 17, 2005). We are receiving mixed messages, for sure.

The entertainment industry, on the other hand, is largely unconcerned with what real adolescents are doing. Movie and television producers opt to stimulate youthful sexual expression and to glamorize emerging sexuality. Pornographic Web sites feature "just barely legal" teens supposedly bursting with pent-up, "forbidden" sexual desire. Video games come rated by how

much sex and violence appear therein. *Donkey Kong* and *Space Invaders* have given way to games like *Playboy: The Mansion* and *Grand Theft Auto*, programmed with hidden sex scenes. “Grinding” to sexually explicit hip hop lyrics is a popular dance form among young Americans. Skin is definitely in. America is becoming “sexier” while the focus of sex is becoming younger.²

Even the practice of social science is not exempt from this sea change. The terms that social scientists use to describe adolescent sexuality have undergone an evolution in recent years. “Losing virginity” has been subtly deemed too negative and “coitus” too scientific. Each has been increasingly replaced by the more impartial “first sex” or the positive-sounding “sexual debut.” Some even refer to “sexual onset,” as if the first experience of intercourse were somehow the beginning of a chronic medical condition (Browning, Leventhal, and Brooks-Gunn 2005).

At the same time, many Americans remain very ambivalent about sex. News reports abound about the high school teacher who pursues a forbidden sexual relationship with her own student and in turn is sentenced to prison “for love,” the public officeholder who is caught in a sexual dalliance and forced to resign, the pastor who admits a porn habit and is summarily dismissed by his “sexually pure” church council. Whether punishing or peeping, Americans are a gawking nation when it comes to sex. It captures our attention, our gaze, and sometimes our ire. We remain fixated on punishing the sexually deviant, even as “deviant” sexuality remains a moving target. As a society, we are caught somewhere between understanding sex as sacred and thinking it profane.

Despite all of the mixed messages and confusion, and much to their parents’ relief, most youth make it through the teenage years alive and without the sorts of life-altering incidents or conditions that could significantly alter their transition into adulthood (pregnancy, childbearing, rape, a criminal record, etc.). All of which is not to suggest that adolescence ever was—or has become—less stressful. It remains the life stage of greatest and most rapid change. Teenagers have to get along with their parents and adjust to their divorces, battle their own blues, make and keep friendships, build a reputation, try to fit in, concern themselves with grades and college entrance exams, deal with the pressure to look attractive, come to grips with their own emerging sexual feelings, hope for a date, get over being dumped (Eccles 1999; Steinberg and Morris 2001). Some of the turning points of adolescence are inevitable, such as the onset of puberty or one’s first menstrual period, the transition from middle school to high school, and reaching the legal driving age. Other turning points are not inevitable but still common, including family relocations, high school graduation, the pursuit of higher

education, and—for a considerable majority—the loss of virginity³ and the commencement of paired sexual activity.

This book is about the last set of these voluntary turning points—the formation of sexual attitudes and motivations, and the initial and subsequent experiences of sexual intercourse and related sexual activities. In particular, I will consider how religion shapes the sexual lives of contemporary American adolescents: what sex means, what adolescents know and expect about sex, and what strategies adolescents use to negotiate the very mixed messages they receive about sex (Martin 2002).

There are numerous ways in which religion *might* affect adolescent sexuality and its practice, including their attitudes, beliefs about, and practices of contraception, masturbation, premarital sexual intercourse, oral sex, homosexuality, bisexuality, and the use of pornography, to name several. Religion might also indirectly shape these things through its effects on friendship choices, dating patterns, parental monitoring, and how adolescents choose to use their time (Wallace and Williams 1997). Yet how religion contributes to sexual values and behaviors *in reality* is not well understood. We should not presume that religion shapes how adolescents understand and express their sexuality simply by observing that some youth are religious. In other words, I want to know how *consequential* religion is among them (Glock and Stark 1965). Does religion matter when adolescents make sexual decisions and take actions? How so? If not, why not? Does Christianity—which is what most American adolescents practice—typically function as little more than a generally assumed cultural background, or does it really motivate the sexual choices of a significant segment of adolescent society? This book takes a solid step in the direction of deciphering the religion-sex association and pursuing explanations for the evidence that emerges from two nationally representative surveys and in-depth interviews with more than 250 adolescents across the country.

WHYRELIGION?

Evaluating adolescent sexual behavior never goes out of style. It just requires constant updating. Social forces that influence adolescent sexual behavior at one point are often found to have changed when reexamined just 10 years later (Joyner and Laumann 2000). As a result, studies on teenagers and sexuality crop up with regularity to appease parents', educators', and lawmakers' hunger for information.

So why ruin a good social scientific study of adolescent sexual behavior by focusing on religion? Wouldn't I be better off turning my attention toward

what scholars suggest *really* matters for adolescent behavior: influences like friendships, peer pressure, body image, educational ambitions, or emotional health? Or perhaps something more sociological, like race or gender? Or the current queen of influences on all things important—social capital?⁴

First, religion and sexuality tap basic drives. Sex concerns the pursuit of an intimate connection with another human being—to be known and to know someone else intensely. Religion concerns the need to make sense and meaning out of life, to connect with something or someone higher and purer than yourself, outside of the realm of the empirical. In short, both religion and sex are *elemental* life pursuits, not mere window dressing but close to the heart of what it means to be human. Perhaps their shared association is why beautiful women are sometimes referred to as “goddesses,” why companies like Victoria’s Secret dress their models in angelic garb, and why the phrase “forbidden fruit” conjures up images that are both religious and sexual (Yancey 2003).

Second, religion—together with peers, parents, and the media—remains a primary socialization agent of children and adolescents. Though often an understated influence in adolescents’ lives, religion as traditionally practiced nevertheless performs a variety of important social functions (independently of its varying particular content): it is both an internal and external social control mechanism; it explicitly and implicitly reinforces collectively held values and beliefs by forbidding some things and encouraging others; it provides social networks to individuals; it encourages trust, caring, and self-sacrifice (Wuthnow 1995); it has enduring faith in the possibility of individual transformation; it galvanizes and organizes moral indignation (Smith 1996); and its practitioners are committed to the next generation. Participation in religious institutions often provides adherents with functional communities (sometimes amid dysfunctional families or communities) and reinforces parental support networks and control. Organized religion establishes norms and reinforces them with its power as a formal institution (Regnerus and Elder 2003). The list could continue. Moreover, since religion often shapes parenting styles, the role of religion in many teenagers’ lives may begin at their birth, if not sooner (Bartkowski and Ellison 1995).

Unfortunately, some social scientists ignore religious institutions, organizations, and the power of belief not because they are blind to them (which may be the case for some) but because they remain convinced that religion is epiphenomenal. That is, they believe that religion is *only* about networks of social control, supervised peer groups, and organizational participation. Even when taken seriously, religious influence on human behavior is often mischaracterized and misunderstood in the academic community. Religion in general is often associated with sexual conservatism (if not complete ignorance),

repression, prudish behavior, and a tendency toward avoidance, abstinence, and generalized condemnation. But are such associations true?

Third, sex is a sphere of human behavior high in religious applicability. By this, I mean that it is a topic that has more religious relevance—or is more clearly addressed in most religious traditions—than many other topics. Few theologies or religious schemas attempt to sacralize all of life. Much more common is the division of human action into the religiously important (the sacred) and the religiously unimportant (the profane). Some spheres of life, like family and sexuality, are typically seen as more centrally related to religious faith. Other spheres, like employment, leisure activity, and personal finances, are often understood as less central to religious faith.

When roles or norms about what to do in a particular situation compete—for example, to obey your beliefs or to give in to your hormones and a willing partner's expectations—the behavior's religious applicability may affect which roles or norms are adhered to (Wimberley 1989). On the other hand, some classes of actions—like civic participation, sports, and education—employ much less religious applicability, since there are fewer religious teachings or guidelines about them. Failing geometry does not make someone a bad Christian. Quitting the basketball team may invoke guilt, disappointment, and some ostracism, but it is religiously irrelevant.

Sex is simply a sphere of life that has considerable religious import for many Americans. While sexuality falls outside the specific mandate of churches (which is to make Christians, to encourage worship of God, etc.), it does not fall far, since sexuality is tied to the institution of the family, and the family is often closely linked to organized religion (Ellingson 2004). Thus, evaluating the implications of religion for actual sexual decision making makes perfect sense. Remarkably, though, few attempts have been made to determine why exactly religion matters for some adolescents' sexual decision making and not for others' (Hardy and Raffaelli 2003).

THE PARAMETERS OF THIS STUDY

This book's primary purpose is to take an extended look into the real lives of American teenagers and to document whether religious faith affects—if at all—how they think about sexuality and the practices in which they choose to either engage or refrain. To accomplish this, I employ a variety of research methods and draw on several different data sources on American youth. My primary source is the National Survey of Youth and Religion (hereafter referred to as NSYR), of which I am a project co-investigator. From July 2002 to April

2003, we conducted a national, random-digit-dial telephone survey of a sample of all American household telephone numbers. Eligible households included at least one teenager between the ages of 13 and 17 living in the household for at least six months of the year. In order to randomize responses within households, and so to help attain representativeness of age and gender, we asked to conduct the survey with the teenager in the household who had the most recent birthday. There were 3,370 adolescents who completed the survey, and an accompanying parent interview was conducted with either their mother or father, as they were available (see appendix B for a detailed description of the research methodologies employed in the primary data sources I use).

The second phase of the data collection of the NSYR involved in-depth personal interviews with 267 teenagers from all around the country, drawn from the pool of respondents who had completed the telephone survey. The majority of the in-person interviews were conducted between March 2003 and August 2003, with a final few completed as late as January 2004. The purpose of the interviews was to provide extended follow-up discussions about adolescents' religious, spiritual, family, and social lives. The questionnaire followed closely and expanded upon the topics that were included on the NSYR telephone survey (see appendix B). The interview sample was selected from among the 3,370 adolescents who completed the NSYR telephone survey, and the pool of actual interviewees was drawn taking into account the following demographic characteristics: urban/suburban/rural, region, age, sex, race, household income, religion, and school type. We attempted to achieve a balance in each of these areas. Seventeen different interviewers conducted interviews in 45 U.S. states, each interviewer conducting between 10 and 20 interviews (see Figure I.1). Finally, I draw upon a small number of follow-up interviews with these same youth that were conducted during the summer of 2005, two years after we first spoke with them.

My second source of extensive survey data is the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. "Add Health," as it is commonly referred to, is arguably the most comprehensive survey of adolescents and young adults ever taken. Designed to help explain the causes of adolescent health and health behavior, Add Health pays particular attention to sexuality, focusing on behaviors, motivations, risk perceptions, and attitudes. Add Health also includes information on the important contexts in an adolescent's life, namely, parents, schools, communities, friends, and romantic partners.

The NSYR and Add Health together comprise the best available nationally representative data to study the influence of religion on the sexual attitudes and practices of America's teenagers. Nevertheless, I occasionally draw on evidence from other national studies, such as the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and Monitoring the Future.⁵



FIGURE I.1. Distribution of NSYR Survey Follow-up Personal Interviewees

While I report simple frequencies in the text, I also make use of multivariate survey analyses (detailed in the appendixes) as well as note the findings of a wide variety of published social scientific studies, including a number of my own.

For parents, youth workers, and educators, this book should prove enlightening and hopefully useful. Providing information for informed decision making is, after all, a key purpose of the social sciences. Nevertheless, this is not a recipe book for successfully reaching, mentoring, or parenting youth. Instead, I offer a thorough, factual portrait of modern adolescence. This is not a book about young adults, although I make occasional reference to them and to Wave III of the Add Health study, which was fielded during the respondents' early adult years. Thus, I make very few claims here about the sexual attitudes and behavior of persons older than 18. From my own and others' studies, young adulthood is a life stage where sex tends to be more prominent than during the teenage years. That is for another book.

THE SHAPE OF THE BOOK

By now, it should be clear that sex causes considerable ambivalence among Americans, religious or otherwise. We esteem it as sacred, forbid it, police it, yet often treat it as if it were profane. There is no doubt that the issue of sex has

religious ramifications. One need only note the headlines about priest sex scandals and homosexual ordination issues to quickly realize that sex matters for organized religion. Chapter 1 will briefly detail how the historical Christian tradition has thought about sex, culled from interpretations of the Hebrew Old Testament and the New Testament and from more recent religious writings and teachings. Following that, I move from ancient wisdom to the most contemporary of thinkers—adolescents themselves. I set the stage for a number of the book's key themes by offering perspectives from six teenagers, each of whom participates (to varying degrees) in organized religion.

In chapter 2, I briefly review and evaluate the various ways in which social scientists have come to understand how religion affects human behavior in general and adolescent sex in particular. In a nutshell, social scientific debate about the *real* influence of religion on human behavior remains intense. Some reasonable conclusions about it are in order, however.

Chapter 3 explores how adolescents learn sex and sexuality. I discuss various parental strategies for the socialization and education of their children about sex and contraception, focusing on distinctions between moral education and information exchange. We learn that religion matters for what parents say about sex and contraception, with whom they discuss it, how often, and with what ease. I also explore—though only briefly—the association between religion and developing homosexual and bisexual identities, attractions, and practices in adolescence.

Chapter 4 traces the development of adolescent heterosexual ethics and norms, including their motivations to avoid or engage in sex. There, I document what types of adolescents are likely to take abstinence pledges, how well they work, and the sexual and familial idealism they portray. I also explore the popular but vaguely defined theme of “emotional readiness” as a barometer of sexual preparedness.

Chapter 5 consummates the study by focusing on actual sexual behavior: teenagers' experience of “first sex,” their patterns of heterosexual behavior *after* losing virginity, and some adolescents' regrets about sexual activity. I also document their thoughts about—and differential use of—contraception. Several key stories emerge in this chapter—about race, evangelicalism, and what sociologists call “plausibility structures.” Chapter 6 evaluates alternate forms of sex, such as pornography and oral and anal sex. I explore in some detail the preference for replacing vaginal sexual intercourse with forms of sexual expression less threatening to future prospects for material success and conclude that there is evidence of an emerging middle-class sexual morality among some American teenagers.

Chapter 7 returns to “big picture” themes, giving attention to the stated and implicit motivation behind adolescent religious discourse about sexual

decision making. Are devout youth really distinguishing themselves in the sphere of sex *because* of their faith, or is religion a pragmatic and strategic tool to help them reach their goals of avoiding pregnancy and retaining virginity until closer to (or at) marriage? I introduce there a typology of religious influence, which should help us to make sense of the ways in which religion actually affects teenagers' sexual behavior. I then conclude with a summary of the book's key findings and contributions, followed by an unscientific postscript—a series of my own reflections about adolescent sex and the social scientific study of it.

SUMMARIZING ADOLESCENTS' RELIGION

Before I move forward, however, a short introduction to adolescent religiosity is in order. By "religiosity," I am referring to a person's religiousness, as measured several ways, typically in the form of how often they attend religious services, how involved they are in religious activities, how religious they consider themselves to be, and whether they think religion actually matters for their lives and decisions. Since the book is about sex more than it is about religion, I want to steer clear of long descriptions of religious practices, beliefs, and traditions. But a brief overview should help to orient us to what contemporary American teenagers are like when it comes to religion.

Adolescence is the most religiously unstable period of the life course. And how religion affects 13-year-olds may be very different from how it shapes 18-year-olds. Physical, emotional, and moral development occurs at a rapid pace during this period of the lifespan. Such instability provides fodder for some interesting media claims about new religious trends, all the way from spirituality to evangelical revivals and Wicca (e.g., Curran and Estes in the *New York Times*, April 29, 1998; National Public Radio, May 13, 2004; Leland et al. in *Newsweek*, May 8, 2000; Van Biema, Grace, and Mitchell in *Time*, May 31, 1999). Nothing interests media producers and consumers so much as the abnormal, atypical, hypersexual, and paranormal.

So what do social scientists know about the religious lives of adolescents—their beliefs, practices, and affiliations? Most reliable survey research suggests that substantial change happens slowly and that traditional, predictable forms of religion (and sex) are alive and well among American adolescents. To be sure, trends always have their pacesetters, and religious entrepreneurs are adept at attracting a following, but unusual religious practices invariably remain at the cultural margins of American adolescents' religious expression.

According to the NSYR, just over 30 percent of American teenagers identify with a denomination typically considered evangelical (sometimes called conservative) Protestant. By this classification, evangelical Protestant youth outnumber mainline Protestant youth by a ratio of nearly three to one. Slightly more adolescents affiliate with a historically black or African-American denomination⁶ (10.7 percent) than with the historically white mainline. The largest single religious denomination in the United States remains Roman Catholicism, claiming about 23 percent of teenagers. Mormon youth comprise just under 3 percent, about twice the number of Jewish adolescents. American youth who are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or another religious tradition together comprise about 3 percent of all American adolescents. About 16 percent of adolescents identify as not religious. Real atheism—adamant conviction that God does not exist—is much rarer than most people think and nearly absent among American teens. Less than one-half of 1 percent report never having believed in God (Smith and Denton 2005).

By and large, most teenagers—even the oldest ones—retain the religious affiliation of their parents (Smith and Denton 2005). And despite the steady flow of immigrants to the United States, the number of Muslims remains small. There are more Mormon adolescents in America than Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus combined. If the media want to know what is going on religiously with American teenagers, they are likely to get close to the truth by asking an average evangelical Protestant or Catholic 16-year-old. Together, these two groups constitute almost 6 of every 10 American youths.

According to Table I.1, slightly over 40 percent of American adolescents say they attend religious services at least once a week. Roughly the same number attends less frequently. About 18 percent say they never attend at all, but nearly this many attend more than once a week. Although public religious practices *can* be coerced during childhood and adolescence, this is not often the case. The vast majority of adolescents (84 percent, not shown in the table) report that if the decision were up to them, they would still attend their current congregation or congregations (a significant number attend more than one, often due to the religious intermarriage of their parents or stepparents). However, we have not detected considerable enthusiasm about religion among the majority of adolescents, which suggests a generalized religious apathy among many. They can take it or leave it. It's not bothersome, and it doesn't ask too much of them.

About one in every five teenagers, however, says that religion is *extremely* important in shaping how they live their daily lives. These are what I call the "truly devout." Their patterns of behavior are often distinct, even from those (31 percent) who say that religion is "very important." The same can be said

TABLE I.1 Religious Practices and Attitudes of Adolescents (in Percentages)

<i>Church Attendance</i>	
More than once a week	16.2
Weekly	24.3
1–3 times a month	18.8
Several times a year	22.5
Never	18.1
<i>Currently Involved in a Youth Group</i>	37.6
<i>Frequency of Private Prayer</i>	
Many times a day	16.1
About once a day	21.6
Once–few times a week	27.1
At most 1–2 times a month	20.3
Never	14.7
<i>Frequency of Personal Scripture Reading</i>	
Many times a day	2.3
About once a day	6.3
Once–few times a week	17.2
At most 1–2 times a month	33.0
Never	41.0
<i>Importance of Religion in Shaping Daily Life</i>	
Extremely important	19.6
Very important	31.0
Somewhat important	31.2
Not very important	10.8
Not important at all	7.2
<i>Spiritual but Not Religious</i>	
Very true	8.4
Somewhat true	46.4
Not true at all	43.0

Source: National Survey of Youth and Religion

for the 16 percent of youth who attend religious services *more* than once a week, as opposed to once a week (24 percent).

The phrase “spiritual but not religious” has garnered considerable attention lately, though primarily among adults for whom the term is personally appealing. Only about 8 percent of American adolescents (in the NSYR)

confidently self-identify as spiritual but not religious. When we asked adolescents in interviews about this phrase, we often drew blank stares. Even most adolescents who fit the label of spiritual but not religious tend toward answers of “I don’t know,” or “I never heard of that,” or “Huh?”

Religious moderation is a common, important theme among them. While being entirely devoid of religion is odd, if allowable, being too religious can be worse, and such extremes should be avoided. This mentality is consonant with the religious individualist approach that is prevalent among contemporary adolescents. As Christian Smith and Melinda Denton (2005) note, most American teenagers have been well socialized to tolerate the religious and the nonreligious alike. Indeed, most nonreligious youth are not *antireligious*. None of the 267 teens with whom we spoke openly attacked organized religion. This group of Americans is simply not as religiously rebellious as many have made them out to be.

Among the majority, then, religion tends to be personal, private, and largely immune to criticism. Asserting only one tradition as true borders on overconfidence, if not overreligiousness. Many youths, extensively socialized into the digital age, find historical religious traditions outdated, open to spontaneous alteration, or simply too challenging to adopt. Many of the adolescents with whom we spoke in person hold low opinions of other people’s personal morality, but high views of their own. When asked whether they had been involved recently in anything that was “wrong,” adolescents typically reply with a simple answer: no. Most, however, said they *have* opposed their friends’ actions at some point. Few could articulate why some things (like murder) may be absolutely wrong. Granted, many adolescents have never been asked such pointed questions about religion and morality (which is too bad). But even beyond this, their generalized inability to discuss morality underscores the thin moral education so many of them receive (Hunter 2000). As Smith and Denton (2005) note about religion—and the same could be said for morality in general—it is like any other language: to learn how to speak it, a person must first listen to “native speakers” and then practice speaking it herself. Few parents, even among the devoutly religious, are native speakers.

In sum, religious *passion* is not the norm among American teenagers. Many youth pray regularly and find it easy to do so. They read the Bible (or the Torah) less regularly than they pray, as the time it takes to read is subject to fierce competition within their busy lives. Most youth are not spiritual seekers, and recent media attention on spirituality has clearly overestimated its popularity among this demographic. Morality matters to adolescents, but they are a tolerant group and typically avoid evaluations of their peers that could be construed as judgmental. People are deemed good or bad because of their

actions, not their religion. For this reason, there is little systematic religious bigotry among adolescents. They are well versed in tolerance. Even those we might suspect otherwise, such as evangelicals, tend to give voice to the American language of individualism: “I think my religious views are true, but others may see the world differently, and that’s OK.” For most, God is more gracious than demanding and serves to help them out when they’re in a pinch (Smith and Denton 2005). While this description is not true of all American youth—there are both irreligious and devout minorities on either side of the spectrum—it certainly captures the middle majority.

Chapter 1



FASHIONING NEW STORIES FROM OLD WISDOM

*Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage
bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and
all the sexually immoral.*

—Hebrews 13:4

A good place to formally begin a book on religion and sex is with what organized religion has had to say about sex, the traditions upon which contemporary youth are able to draw. Religious commentary on sexual behavior is plentiful, yet confusing and seemingly contradictory at points. Yet knowing what religious traditions have said about sex gives us a more intelligent benchmark against which to evaluate what contemporary adolescents both *say* and *do* about their emerging sexuality. And, as I discuss at length in chapter 7, there are a variety of possible say-and-do combinations. Since this study is of Americans, and the vast majority of them are either Protestant or Catholic, I largely confine my report to what these historic traditions have had to say about sexual matters.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY ON SEX

Biblical sexuality begins in the Garden of Eden, at the start of it all in Genesis 2 and 3. There, Adam and Eve live naked and unashamed. The serpent—thought by some to be a sexual symbol—comes to tempt Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Hebrew term for *knowledge* can itself imply sexual intercourse (as in Gen. 4:1, where Adam “knew” Eve, after which she conceived a son). She eats the fruit and gives some to Adam, who likewise eats. Subsequently, their eyes are “opened,” they are no longer “innocent,” and they become aware of their nakedness. Adam defends himself before God by accusing Eve of giving him the forbidden fruit. Such a sexual interpretation of the account of the Fall—though not a widely held one—is nevertheless clearly not without evidence (Bandstra 2004).

Most biblical references to sex are far less symbolic. Sexual “immorality” or “impurity” is widely and consistently reviled in biblical texts. In at least 11 of its

27 books, the New Testament denounces πορνεία (*porneia*), a Greek word for sexual immorality from which we derive the term *pornography*. Its meaning in historical context, though, had nothing to do with sexual images but rather had to do with behavior. References to lewdness, things that are sexually immoral or “licentious,” are found at several points in the Old Testament—especially in the prophecies of Ezekiel—but only sparingly in the New Testament. According to Paul of Tarsus, the well-traveled New Testament missionary who penned 13 letters within the biblical canon, sexual sin is a serious matter, more grave than most transgressions. A person who sins sexually has “sinned against his own body,” a reference to defiling or degrading what Christ has purified through his atoning death (1 Cor. 6:18).

Biblical accounts favor monogamous marital sexuality as a gold standard of sorts. But the matter is more complicated than it might first seem. Marriage is defined in the Old Testament, but many aspects of the Old Testament law are no longer practiced by Christians (such as animal sacrifices and a man’s responsibility to marry his sister-in-law in the event of his brother’s death).¹ Hence, most popular Christian references about sex tend to draw upon the New Testament. Still, the Old Testament commandment “you shall not commit adultery” is often used as a blanket reference to all forms of nonmarital sexual conduct.

In the biblical era, marriage involved both an agreement between a man and his betrothed wife’s father or family, and the sexual consummation of the marriage. While formal marriage ceremonies were common, they were not required to validate a marriage. In the earliest set of instructions, God states, “a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh,” implying sexual consummation as a criterion of marriage (Gen. 2:24). No mention is made yet about permission to marry or virginity conditions.

“Fornication,” or sex between unmarried partners, entailed a subsequent relational commitment. The Old Testament also makes reference to the term *concubine*, or a secondary sexual relationship between a married man and an unmarried woman, who in turn enjoyed familial protection but had little household authority. Old Testament Hebrew culture tolerated—but did not actively advocate—the practice of having multiple wives and concubines. Thus the penalty for sexual relations between a man and an unmarried woman—one who was not pledged to be married to another man—tended to be light, involving payment to the woman’s family. A woman’s virginity was—and, to some extent and in some subcultures, remains—a valued commodity (González-López 2004). While certainly subject to considerable measurement error, only female virginity could ever have been documented (by an intact hymen).

Married women, on the other hand, were always off limits. In the Old Testament law, sexual relations between a man and a married woman were punishable by the death of both partners (Deut. 22). Enforcement of the law, of

course, varied widely. How often adulterers escaped the death penalty or went unnoticed is unknown. King David has sexual relations with the married Bathsheba, then orders her husband's death. Yet he escapes capital punishment for his actions. Instead, God is said to have struck down the child produced by their liaison. God even appears to buck his own rules for the sake of making particular points. For example, God tells the prophet Hosea to take as his wife an "adulterous" woman, in order to signify God's anger with his people (Israel), who are "guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord" (Hos. 1:2). Indeed, Israel's relationship with God is often portrayed using sexual imagery. The prophecies of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah accuse Israel of consorting with "prostitutes"—people of neighboring countries who worship other gods. At the same time, God often perceives Israel—and in the New Testament, the Church—as his "bride."

New Testament writings on sexuality are less fraught with imagery, less concerned with laws and penalties, and much more commonly cited in contemporary Christian writings about sex. They also increasingly recognize the inappropriateness of polygamy and the importance of sexuality within marriage. Jesus makes disparaging references to the popular interpretation of Jewish law that allows a man to divorce his wife for any reason. Instead, Jesus suggests that only sexual unfaithfulness constitutes grounds for divorce. He also criticizes the use of the death penalty for adultery (John 8:7). Thus, the person of Jesus has come to be associated both with forgiveness of sexual sins and a greater emphasis on the "heart" than on external behavior. This shift in perspective is evident when he tells his followers to focus less on adultery *per se* and more on lust—the mental (or heart's) desire to commit adultery (Matt. 5:28). Lust, he suggests, is equivalent to adultery in God's eyes, since it reveals the sinful condition of a person's will, even if unaccompanied by explicit action. Jesus refers directly to the connection between sexual sin and heart commitment: "What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, [including] sexual immorality . . . adultery . . . lewdness" (Mark 7:20–22).

Nevertheless (and, some would say, unfortunately), the words of Jesus are neither extensive nor detailed on sexual matters. Paul of Tarsus is more vocal, often responding in writing to particular sex-related crises in early Christian congregations. If a single biblical passage could characterize the hopes and aspirations of devoutly religious American parents for their adolescent children, it would probably be found in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, a Greek city synonymous with sexual permissiveness:

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know

that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. (1 Cor. 6:18–20)

The author of Hebrews (13:4) argues that “marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.”² Such texts sufficiently warn about the spiritual dangers of sexual immorality yet lack details or practical advice.

Not all biblical references to sex concern immoral practices. Shortly after arguing that the body is a “temple” (i.e., holy), Paul admonishes married couples to consider each other’s bodies as belonging to the other and commands husbands and wives to “not deprive each other [of sex] except by mutual consent and for a time. . . . Then come together again” (1 Cor. 7:5). The Old Testament’s Song of Solomon is widely regarded as a sensual read and a model of ideal marital sexuality, though the identities of the lover and the beloved and the exact nature of their relationship is not explicitly disclosed (and it is well documented that King Solomon himself had many wives).

Biblical commentary on masturbation remains unclear. Passages concerning homosexuality (e.g., 1 Thess. 4:3–4; Rom. 1:24; and 1 Cor. 6:9) have been used to condemn masturbation, but the link is suspect. The one account that appears to involve masturbation—or else the contraceptive practice of withdrawal—details God’s fatal ire at Onan for “spilling his seed” on the ground rather than attempting to conceive children with the wife of his dead brother (Gen. 38:8–10). However, this is now widely interpreted as a story about God’s displeasure with Onan not so much for his particular sexual act but for failing to fulfill his lawful obligation to his brother, a law no longer recognized as valid by most Jews and Western Christians.

Practices like oral sex are not addressed in the Bible at all. Popular Christian writer Lauren Winner (2005: 106) humorously attends to its absence while still advocating against its use outside marriage:

OK, readers. Does St. Paul say anything explicitly about oral sex? No. Could one make a tortured, literalistic argument that one was having oral sex and not breaking the letter of biblical law? I suppose so. And yet most honest and right-thinking Christians recognize, at least intuitively, that oral sex constitutes sex—that if a husband . . . had oral sex with someone other than his wife, he would have committed adultery; and that a single person’s having oral sex would constitute a trespass of chastity.

While tomes have been written—and will continue to be published—on the topic of homosexual practice and the Christian tradition, the practice of

same-sex sexual behavior by Christians will probably always be more contested than heterosexuality. Biblical justifications for the moral neutrality of homosexual practice often note that Jesus himself had nothing to say about the issue explicitly and that there are not many scriptural passages that directly address the issue. Nevertheless, the biblical record that does exist tends to disparage homosexual practice. While even here scholars have argued that such texts (like 1 Cor. 6:9) may in fact refer to homosexual *abuses* rather than consensual homosexual practice, most American Christians who tolerate or embrace homosexual practice as acceptable tend to do so apart from—rather than via—the biblical record, grounding their response instead in a sense of compassion, social justice, or the perceived need for Christian faith to “get with the times.”

So why are most Christian traditions so concerned about sex, since plenty of Old and New Testament characters hardly display sexual fidelity? And why is it so important to them to restrict sex to within heterosexual marriage? While the answers to these questions certainly vary, many Christian traditions formally (though not often practically) articulate that marriage—and, by extension, sex—is essentially a portrait or reflection of God’s relationship with his people. It is a New Testament theme that builds on the Old Testament idea of covenant. God promises to love his chosen people, despite their persistent unfaithfulness, and this is made evident in the form of a variety of covenants (with Abraham, Israel, etc.). Paul of Tarsus equates marriage and marital sexuality—“becoming one flesh” (Eph. 5:31)—to the relationship between Jesus Christ and his followers: “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it [marriage, becoming one flesh] refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). In this way, sex points beyond humanity to a divine relationship that hints at the very character of God. Note the sexual double entendre of talk about believers enjoying *union* with Christ and *intimacy* with him.

In turn, Christians are taught to believe that it is their responsibility to reflect God’s image and nature by demonstrating the same commitment and intimacy within a covenantal relationship (marriage). Thus, Christians are to restrict sex to marriage not simply because God or Jesus said so—they did—or because Bible stories always honor marital sexuality and disparage other sexual relationships—they do not—but because doing so reflects God’s promise-keeping nature. And marital sexuality is thought to reflect God’s intentions for human flourishing, which is why many religious conservatives see the institution of marriage as applicable to everyone—not just those of faith. Lest I erroneously suggest that this is how most Christians actually *think* about sex and marriage, I want to stress that these are the tools their traditions offer them. Whether they employ them or instead pay more attention to modern marital and sexual norms is another story, one I will engage further herein.

MODERN CHRISTIAN SENTIMENT ON SEX

Much more than just the biblical record has shaped contemporary Christian thinking about sex. However, modern Christian commentary on sex is not as well understood or embraced by the average Christian adolescent or adult. The biblical texts and the simpler themes noted above are much easier to recall. Among other modern Christian themes is the “celebration” of sex within marriage: since humans were made in the image and likeness of God, sexual design and feelings are the way God intended them to be and are not necessarily to be stifled. In this light, biblical “rules” about sex are recognized as guidelines for both protecting something of great value *and* encouraging sexual freedom within boundaries, rather than as means to stifle pleasure.

From Evangelical Protestants

A good deal has been written by popular evangelical authors—or, at least, authors popular among evangelicals—not only about the boundaries for sex, but also about its benefits (Leman 1999; Smedes 1976; Winner 2005). Christians even publish books on sexual technique, though sans any illustrative photographs (Penner and Penner 2003; Wheat and Wheat 1981). Church-sponsored marriage-enhancement workshops and weekend getaways are promoted to enhance, albeit subtly, marital sexual satisfaction between spouses.

Thus evangelical Protestants may be best understood not as “anti-sex” but as concerned with appropriate sexual boundaries—the who and when of sex, not so much the what or how. Still, this mix of celebration and condemnation can be confusing. While marital sexuality is applauded, extramarital sexual activity remains one of the gravest offenses a person of faith can commit. Lauren Winner (2005: 95) laments: “these days most church folk who speak or write about sex bend over backward to insist that *married* sex is great. But somehow the church still manages to convey anxiety and discomfort about sex writ large.” Social scientists agree: “Christians who try to affirm the goodness of sex find themselves in organizations that have strong and still operative beliefs about the dangers and immorality of sexual behavior” (Ellingson, Van Haitsma, Laumann, and Tebbe 2004: 311).

Because marriage is so esteemed, and because even most evangelical adults tend to delay marriage well into their 20s, adolescent (and therefore “single”) sexuality is a perennial subject of interest and the topic of numerous books, typically on how to resist sexual temptation, or—failing that—how to restore a sense of sexual purity. Most of these books are not educational, like those noted

above, but rather assume readers' extensive sexual knowledge and offer help in living what is thought to be a biblical sexual lifestyle.

Evangelical and mainline Protestant organizations have made few statements about fertility and the use of contraception, having somewhat reluctantly approved contraceptive practices early in the twentieth century. Evangelicals tend to only (weakly) contest contraceptive methods that serve as abortifacients, that is, they could operate to expel a fertilized egg rather than only to prevent fertilization (e.g., intrauterine devices, some hormonal methods). And even here, the debate is largely muted by the far noisier contest over abortion, which a majority of evangelicals decry and a majority of mainliners support. A nascent group of evangelicals has recently begun to contest the assumed ethics of contraception in general, but their audience and influence so far is limited.

From Mormons

While one may equate sexual conservatism with evangelical Protestants, they are hardly the only religious tradition that could be considered so. Nor do they tend to organize their sexual conservatism into structures of accountability, at least not systematically. In this way, Mormons (formally known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; LDS) outpace evangelicals in terms of the organization of sexual social control. Among them, chastity is taught in Sunday schools, youth groups, and "seminary" (or daily) classes of religious instruction, along with other core doctrines. Mormons believe that misuse of the powers of procreation is a serious sin, viewed as the misuse of the power to give life. All members over the age of 12 are interviewed periodically by their local congregational leader (a bishop) concerning their temple "worthiness." (The temple is considered the pinnacle of LDS worship.) Temple worthiness is defined by affirmative responses to such questions as whether or not one pays a full tithe, follows the Word of Wisdom (abstaining from tea, coffee, and tobacco), and adheres to the "law of chastity," defined broadly in the LDS faith to encompass *any* sexual contact outside of marriage (including masturbation and oral sex). If adherence to the law of chastity is at issue, the youth will typically have to undergo a repentance process, which is confidentially overseen by a bishop but entails a temporary revocation of temple privileges. So while no explicitly public sanctions are applied, clear incentives remain in order to actively participate in youth temple going and to live up to the church's "gospel standards" for its members. In sum, the practice of worship and spiritual progression (including serving on a mission, marriage, etc.) are linked to these ordinances, and a network accountability system has been institutionalized to ascertain worthiness.

From Roman Catholics

The Roman Catholic church tends to be more eloquent on matters of sexuality, if less popular than evangelical authors. The centralized and hierarchical nature and extensive resources of the Roman Catholic church allow it to offer clearer instructions about sexual morality (Ellingson, Van Haitsma, Laumann, and Tebbe 2004). Despite his “conservative” reputation, Pope John Paul II actually thought and wrote a good deal about human sexuality, primarily in his first book, *Love and Responsibility*, published in 1960. Then Cardinal Wojtyła, he was considered edgy and was nearly censored for his frank commentary about sexual function and pleasure. He argued that sexual happiness cannot be had by oneself in the free pursuit of relationships but must *depend* upon another person. This is not just because it takes two to tango but rather because sexual fulfillment hinges on two free *persons* (rather than two bodies) “seeking personal and common goods together” (Weigel 1999: 142). Such a radical giving of self and receiving of another person in sexual “communion” is close to the foundation of humanity, he articulated. It is the wonder of the first man, Adam, recognizing the naked Eve as “flesh of my flesh.” Intercourse is intended to deepen personal relationships, and desire for it is intended to promote marriage. *Love and Responsibility* and his later collection of philosophical writings, *The Theology of the Body*, emphasize chastity, a term often confused with celibacy. While one could define chastity in terms of rules (such as, no sex outside of marriage), Weigel (1999: 142) refers to John Paul II’s description of it as “the integrity of love” and “putting one’s emotional center, and, in a sense, one’s self, in the custody of another.” Lust as the opposite of chastity desires pleasure through the *use* of another human being rather than through mutual self-giving. In a statement that generated considerable media flak, John Paul II suggested that the misuse of sex was even possible *within* marriage. That is, marriage itself does not guarantee sexual chastity.

Talk of sexual abstinence is not only for the unmarried, either. As one Catholic author quipped, “those who never really fast, never really feast” (Wiley 2004: 96). That is, abstinence as a habit should be practiced not only in the virginity of the unmarried but also in the periodic abstinence of married couples practicing “natural family planning” (NFP).

Probably the most famous (or perhaps infamous) doctrine on sexuality to come from the Roman Catholic Church is its forbidding of chemical and mechanical forms of birth control and its preference instead for NFP, based on a woman’s fertility cycle. Artificial contraception, the Church argues, demeans women rather than empowers them, because its use encourages men to view women as objects of sexual pleasure. It undermines human dignity, discourages

responsibility, and understands children as problems to be avoided rather than as gifts to be valued. However, the most well-known exposition of this doctrine—Pope Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae* (1968)—clearly misfired with millions of Catholics worldwide, and many Catholics still ignore this aspect of church doctrine. A more winsome advocate of NFP than Paul VI, John Paul II argued that the control of fertility encourages humanity’s degradation through a utilitarian approach to human relationships, which is something to be resisted in all spheres of life, not just sexuality (Weigel 1999). The “blessing” and responsibility of fertility are ways in which humans are thought to reflect the image of God and to reproduce “the mystery of creation” (Weigel 1999: 337).

Catholic teachings about human sexuality and fertility are not widely practiced by Catholics worldwide, many of whom associate Catholicism with sexual conservatism. Even among the informed, many parishioners ignore the doctrines and many priests overlook them. If so few adult Catholics are even able to articulate their church’s teachings on sex, how could one possibly expect their adolescents to know them and to act accordingly? The same could be said for evangelical and mainline Protestants. And even when well understood, religious teachings are not always easy to follow. Sexuality “has a plasticity and variegated logic of its own” that often undermines organizational efforts to control it (Ellingson 2004: 308).

RELIGION AND SEX IN CONTEMPORARY LIVES: THE STORIES OF SIX ADOLESCENTS

The plasticity of sexuality quickly becomes evident when one moves from talking about historical doctrine to speaking with real people. Indeed, understanding biblical texts and moderns’ interpretations of them is only so helpful. It provides a clear sense of what the religious resources about sex are, but conveys nothing of how regular people draw upon them, if at all. Even survey data—of which I will make extensive use—are limited in their ability to convey just how adolescents really think about sex, how they desire its pleasure or fear its pain, how they actually go about making sexual decisions, and how they reconcile their religious faiths with the choices they make.

I want to introduce the key issues and themes in this book by telling short stories about six particular adolescents: Valerie, Ben, Kristin, Jarrod, Justin, and Carla. Each of them is white except Jarrod (who is African American), middle class, and religious (Christian) to some degree. They all reported on the survey that they attended church services at least semiregularly. They are not a random

sample of our interview pool, but their stories represent common themes and experiences of religious youth. Their accounts can serve as a baseline of sorts to compare with other adolescents whose stories and remarks will be featured later. Only names and geographical locations (to a similar city or state within the region) have been changed.

Valerie

We spoke with Valerie in Kansas City. A 15-year-old self-proclaimed Christian, she grew up in a blue-collar Catholic household but now attends a Pentecostal (Assemblies of God) congregation and a small Christian school, each of which she enjoys a great deal. The youngest of four siblings, Valerie still misses her mother, a Jewish convert to Christianity who died of breast cancer when Valerie was five: “it sucks, but I learned to live with it.” Her memories of her mother are few but positive: “she was very, she was a good Christian and she was really beautiful, but, I mean, I don’t really remember her personality.” Her father has not remarried, although he is dating a woman of whom Valerie approves: “[t]his one’s really nice. Like, he seems happy.” Valerie and her father get along pretty well. It was not always so: a rebellious period early in her teenage years undermined his trust in her, which she is still working to rebuild. Her father is not into organized religion, at least not to the extent that Valerie is. Her father and brothers actually believe “in the same things I do, they just don’t act it.”

Valerie has close ties with several adults, including a youth pastor and a set of “spiritual parents” at her church. She can talk to them about “certain things” that she cannot with her father. She also enjoys a close relationship with her 21-year-old sister, with whom she shares a measure of religious faith. When asked whom in the world she admires most, she names her sister and her spiritual mother, who is “just a woman of God, she’s really cool.”

Like many adolescents who attend theologically conservative congregations, Valerie recalls a time in her life when she “made a decision” and “started being different” from her old friends and peers. At first, I wondered if she had been all that different in her past, or if she was feeling pressure to make her past sound worse than it was. After all, she is only 15: “I used to do a lot of stuff my dad didn’t know about. [OK, *what kind of stuff?*] Like drugs and hanging out with boys.” Later, she remarks that she had “smoked weed every day,” a habit she picked up at age 11, drank alcohol, and was regularly overdosing on cold medicine by age 13. She

hung out with a lot of people who hung out with gangs and they would always talk about it [drinking] and I wanted to know what it was like, so I did it.

[*Why do you think you did those things?*] Probably partly, in the beginning, just to be accepted by other people. Because everyone was doing it, and I was the innocent one. [laughs]

Eventually she lost her virginity in a regrettable episode: “I wasn’t dating, but I mean I liked the person and he supposedly liked me.” Being arrested for possession of marijuana played a role in bringing matters to a head, primarily by revealing her dad’s disappointment in her: “[y]ou look in his [her father’s] eyes and it just hurts you because you know that he’s, that [disappointment] is inside now.” Around that time, her sister introduced her to the youth group at the Assembly of God church. Valerie credits her sister for helping to lift her out of the mess she felt she was in. Her dad also knows about her sexual experience: “[i]t’s kind of hard for me to know that my dad knows, and it’s like, ‘whoa.’ But at the same time, it’s good just to keep me, like, on track and just to know, like, how my dad felt about it.” Her Christian friends know about it too, but most of them encourage her with comments like “that’s your past, so it’s OK.”

Her older sister remains an avowed virgin, which Valerie admires considerably: “that’s very unusual these days, and you know, just seeing her never go for just any guy or never going for sex. Like if she could do it, then why couldn’t I?” But virtue is not Valerie’s only motivation. She reports that a friend of hers who is sexually active will “go to the clinic to see if, like, she’s OK [free of STDs, pregnancy], and I never really wanted to go through that. . . . It’s kind of scary just to think you have something.”

Valerie attempts to avoid filling her mind with particular images and music: “[t]he devil can use anything, and music is a big thing.” She listens to Christian rap, worship music, and “just soft stuff.” She tries to avoid watching movies with explicit “sexual stuff,” and while not attracted to pornography, she suggests that its real danger lies in what it does to people’s minds, including her brothers’. In her youth group, Valerie has what she calls an “accountability partner,” another girl with whom she is encouraged to be open and honest about temptations. “It helps a lot,” she admits. She draws strength from prayer, worship services, and the youth group and its retreats, and she gains inspiration from reading the stories of “martyrs and people who die for, like, their beliefs and stuff, like um, on the other side of the world.”

Valerie is clearly better off now at age 15 than she was at 13. Yet negative peer influences are unavoidable: “[m]y cousins all smoke weed and smoke cigarettes and my brothers, so it’s, it’s in my house. Like, it’s really easy for me to do it if I wanted to.” But she no longer wants to. All of that, she suggests, is both wrong and behind her: “God made you in a specific way,” and substance use “makes you a whole different person.” While Valerie confesses to occasional temptation, she conveys a sense of optimism about her future: “my

mind's made up. . . . I've learned how to deal with it and not care what other people think." She no longer smokes or drinks and has not had sex again. In fact, boys hold diminishing (though still some) appeal: "I'm not gonna put myself in that situation like other girls do. . . . I'm not gonna go flirt with all the guys and stuff." While "gangbangers" used to appeal to her, she now prefers "pretty boys," young men who "take care of themselves" and are "clean-cut." While she occasionally wishes she were dating, Valerie thinks dating "is a problem" for people her age. In her experience, adolescent romance typically invokes emotional pain, pressure, and depression—the results of a relationship gone "too far" (namely, to sexual intercourse). She notes that even devoutly religious youth are not immune from crossing their own boundaries.

Despite her immersion into a set of Christian institutions (school and church), Valerie's description of her "conversion" from destructive behaviors to positive ones is not peppered with explicitly religious language. And when asked how she decides right from wrong, this Pentecostal adolescent makes quick reference not to a biblically based morality but to her modestly religious father: "[b]asically, how I've seen my dad go through stuff and just the way that other people [whom she admires] react to it [the action]." She is like many adolescents, who may not admit it to their parents but who take cues from them in dealing with difficulties. Even when Valerie speaks about sexuality, religious reasoning is unusual and only comes out when we directly ask about it. Her summary of Christian teachings on sex is as follows: "[y]ou're not to have sex before you marry. Like it's a gift from God to have when you're married and, you know, to enjoy between a wife and a husband."

Ben

Ben is a likable, confident, and gracious 17-year-old from Pennsylvania with a diverse set of friends ranging from the studious to the troublemaker. His father is Roman Catholic and his mother is Orthodox. Yet unlike many religiously heterogeneous households, in which only one parent is actually active in a congregation, Ben's parents each attend their own congregations. He primarily attends services with his mother, but he is enrolled at a Catholic high school in a nearby Pittsburgh suburb, so in a way he splits his time between the two traditions. A rising senior, he is active in football, track, and wrestling, unlike his bookish parents. The parent-child differences don't stop there. Ben describes his parents as "conservative" and says he doesn't really feel close to them. On his mother: "I don't sit down and have a full-length conversation with her . . . never did really." Conversations with his father aren't much more numerous. Ben thinks his parents are primarily only interested in his safety and

behavior, not in anything deeper about him. They are parents more than they are friends, a fact that Ben respects. At the same time, he longs to connect at a deeper level with them, but is not optimistic about it happening.

Ben attends church regularly and affirms that “morals” from church tend to “rub off” on him. When asked about his religious life, he primarily recounts parental requirements to attend church, and he recalls a time when his father would make him and his siblings read the Bible every night. Those days have long since ceased—nobody in the family is very religiously involved—but religious ideas remain: “[i]t kinda gets drilled into your head.” He prays regularly, mostly “for forgiveness” for himself and for other people. He doesn’t have time to read the Bible, though he is reticent to admit this. The family occasionally jokes around about religion, “but it’s never like serious.” Ben thinks church involvement is an elective and that all religions are “different interpretations of the same religion.” He could be comfortably classified as a moralistic therapeutic deist, to use Smith and Denton’s (2005) term.³ Most of his friends are not religious, but he describes those who are as unique: “the religious ones seem to care more about what they do.”

Ben’s moral sense appears cobbled together from a variety of sources: religion, “the way I was brought up,” and “things that have not really any tie to religion.” He says he “always” knows right from wrong, but has trouble with “whether I want to do it [the right thing] or not.” I ask how he decides between the two? “Whether or not I’ll get caught, I think, or whether or not I’m kind of like [in] the mood . . . if I feel like it.”

When asked about sex, Ben tells me that he and his father have had “the talk.” “Just once,” Ben states succinctly: “he was very, um, conservative, so it was very scientific the way he put everything.” His mother attempts to monitor his sexual activity by quizzing his younger sister, who acts as her eyes and ears: “I remember a little while ago, she asked her if I had ever had [sexual intercourse], and then I, I never have, so.”

I inquire about what he’d like to accomplish in his life and am met with a standard line about a good job, marriage, etc. Then Ben adds something that no adolescent I interviewed had ever brought up unsolicited: “I would like to, ah, and this kind of sounds funny, like it’s weird, ’cause nobody thinks about this, but I would like to, like, you know, stay a virgin ’til I’m married. It’s kind of important to me.” Considering that Ben doesn’t come across as very religious, this was a surprising revelation. Why does he think this is important?

My dad said it was like kind of a sin to do that and I don’t wanna, and it’s a pretty big one. And it’s in, like, the Bible you know, you shouldn’t. It’s kind of like, I see sex as, like, a gift from God and it’s, like, you know, it feels good for a reason. It’s the reason. The purpose of it is to, like, you know,

reproduce and have kids, so I kind of see when the people, like, premarital sex happens and you have a kid, that it's kind of like a punishment. Like, not a punishment. But like, you know, this is what happens when you do stuff like this. So, and nobody ever stays a virgin until they're married. So I kind of want to do that. It's unheard of now. But I think that's kind of respectable, too.

The Roman Catholic influence on his answer is apparent. I press him on how he will maintain his virginity, inquiring about whether he has ever taken a virginity pledge (largely an evangelical Protestant practice). Ben dismisses such an idea: “[n]o, I would never do that. I think that’s silly.” Has he ever heard of such pledges? “Yeah. But I, I think that’s kind of like, that’s like, that’s like, if you flaunt it. I don’t understand it when people flaunt things. It’s, you know, people, ‘just relax.’”

Ben has had a steady girlfriend for about 20 months and prefers stability and commitment to serial relationships. He will definitely be “the marrying kind” someday: “if you find somebody that you really like, you . . . stick with them as long as possible.” He prefers his girlfriend to dress modestly. How far have they gone? “Third base.” Having grown up a few years earlier, when the bases might have symbolized something different, I play dumb. Ben spells it out: “[f]irst base is kissing and more than light kissing. Second base would be ah, going underneath clothing. Third base is oral sex.” How does he feel about going this far, in light of his position on premarital intercourse?

Um, I don’t think it [oral sex] is sex. Like I don’t think it’s, you know . . . sexual intercourse or anything. It’s kind of like a—I don’t know how to put that, I don’t know how to say it—it’s kind of a like, it’s like substitution. It’s like you’re not actually having sex, like you’re substituting something else for it.

Ben’s frank discussion of substituting oral sex for sexual intercourse is unusual among the adolescents in our study. But that doesn’t mean his opinion or approach to sexual activity is rare. It is a common mentality in Ben’s school:

Oral sex is more [common]; sex is less. Just ’cause, um, oral sex isn’t exactly, like, you know. Sex is like, you know, a big deal. Everybody thinks it’s a huge deal. Oral sex less, ’cause there’s no, really, consequences, you know. There’s STDs, but you know, it’s very rare.

Pregnancy is a “huge” deal, Ben indicates: “[t]here’s a lot of shows and a lot of stories like, you know, so-and-so had a kid and now he’s dropped out of school.” In response, the pill is popular. Such complicated problems and

possibilities prompt Ben to avoid intercourse, although not for religious reasons.

Kristin

If Ben could join the club of moralistic therapeutic deists, Kristin could be its poster child. She is 15 years old, a popular cheerleader in her suburban Atlanta high school, consistently on the A/B honor roll, tan, thin, attractive, and largely unreflective about life. Our very long conversation returned again and again to her favorite themes: friends, parties (and the police), boys, drinking, movies, school, and cheerleading.

Kristin feels close to her mother and father and claims she can tell them most anything. Yet her father pays her little attention, and from her account of things, her mother's concern consists primarily in protecting Kristin from the worst of adolescent popular culture. While Ben pines for deeper connections with his parents, Kristin does not. Her parents "make sure that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing and make sure I have my head on my shoulders and doing good academically and so I have, like, a great path for when I go out to get a job and go to college." Though at times she finds it annoying, she appreciates their concern. She thinks of herself as a normal teenager and finds in that identity considerable freedom to do whatever she feels like doing. Adolescence, in her eyes, is a time of tolerated experimentation and fun. "Most of the time I go with, like, what I feel." Right and wrong "depends on, like, the situation you're in."

She says she enjoys going to church, though her family does not often attend with her, and she herself doesn't go all that often:

We never really get to go, just because, like, my brother either has to work, my mom, she has to work sometimes on Sundays. And my dad normally goes with my grandma, and I'm either like at a friend's house. But when I do spend the night at a friend's house, I normally go to either like Bendon River Baptist Church, because that's where most of my friends go to.

She considers herself a religious person: "We're Methodist and you know, I do go to church and stuff like that and I do, like, you know, respect things in the Bible." When Kristin prays, she asks God to help her in cheerleading competitions and with extended family members' health problems. She is affiliated with two evangelical youth organizations, Young Life and, sometimes, Campaigners. Her description of Young Life suggests that it primarily plays a social role for her, while Campaigners is "more serious." Collectively, religious

activity helps to “keep my life in order and stuff like that and know what I’m doing . . . keep me straight,” but she’s not specific about what a “life in order” looks like and what being “straight” amounts to. I suspect that these are words of respect she pays to organized religion, which in Atlanta and the rest of the American South retains a privileged place in the local culture. Kristin wonders aloud why God keeps on forgiving her “if, you know, I keep doing it [sinning],” but she does not dwell upon such questions. She is consummately tolerant of other faiths—or of no faith at all—and takes for granted that “you can’t, like, say anything against, like, someone else’s religion. Because, like, it’s what they believe in. And it’s like you have to respect their beliefs.” For her, being religious is “not a struggle. Like, it’s easy for me to do.”

Like Valerie, Kristin is no longer a virgin, having had sex with a former boyfriend, who was a high school senior. But unlike Valerie, she has no real regrets about it and even speaks of the pleasures of sex, something comparatively few adolescent girls talked about. But she nevertheless brought the topic up again when asked whether she had done things that she might think are wrong:

Well, I have had sex, and I think my mom knows about it, because, like, she jokes around with me about it and stuff like that, like the other night. . . . I started my period, I was like, ‘cause I was in, like, such a bad mood, and I was being so mean to her and she was like, “What is wrong with you?” And I was like, “I started my period.” And she was like, “Well, I’m glad you started!” And I’m like, “What’s that supposed to mean?” [laughs]

Why does she think having sex might be wrong?

Well, just, like, by what the Bible says, you know, not having sex ‘til you’re married. But at the same time, like, so many kids have had sex and stuff like that. So . . . like kids make up their own morals, too, and of, like, what is right and wrong, so it’s not necessarily like, you know, you’re always gonna go by what the Bible says or what your parents say and stuff like that. It’s sort of, like, a half-and-half thing, like, you know, you make up your own rules and combine them with what your parents say and mix and match. So . . . I don’t know, I mean, it’s not like, I’ve, like I’ve only had sex with, like, one person. And like, we were, like, together in a relationship for like three months. So it’s not as if like I’m, like, a slut or anything. Like with other girls and stuff like that, they go out and like screw many guys ‘cause I have friends that are that way, and, like, those are the people my mom don’t want me hanging out with and stuff like that . . . ‘cause I think she’s just afraid that I’ll probably go out and, like, turn into them so, but, like, it’s not, like I just think, like, it’s not necessarily wrong that I had sex, I don’t think. [*So why do you think you did it?*] Just because. [laughs]

Kristin and her boyfriend dated for less than four months total and broke up early in the spring semester of his senior year. Despite the depth of sentiment that seemed to accompany their consummated relationship, Kristin reports that the two of them concluded, “we don’t want to get too attached to each other because [he’s] gonna be leaving for college next year.” While she has not dated since the recent break-up, sex now logically accompanies dating, in her mind. When asked what makes dating different from other types of friendships, she responds: “[j]ust like the sexual relationship you have with them. And it’s more of, like, you know, a caring factor and, like, trust and stuff like that.” What makes it OK to have sex, with whom, and when?

Well it’s appropriate, like, when you’re in a relationship with them and, you know, and you have been for a while and you really know that you care about the other person and it’s not like if you’re just, like, you know, you met the person like a couple weeks ago and then you’re gonna go and hook up with them.

Though she describes sex as “something, like, really serious,” Kristin also removes herself from any sense of gravity about it: “[y]ou know, you’re gonna have sex, and it’s not gonna be a big deal.” Are certain activities off limits? Not really. “Whatever you guys, like, discuss and whatever you guys got going on [is fine],” she laughs. How does someone know she is ready? “It’s just, like, what you feel. Like, you know, it’s gotta be your decision. Like you can’t, like, no one can pressure you into doing it. Like, it’s your decision.” Kristin thinks her mother is not too concerned: “mainly she just doesn’t want me to go out and like become like a slut or anything.”

Jarrold

Jarrold, a 16-year-old African American from South Carolina, identifies himself as a Baptist and told us over the telephone that religion is an “extremely” important influence in his daily life. In person, however, he says that he doesn’t see himself as much of a religious or spiritual person, and he is presently “having a problem with the Christian religion,” especially with ministers who “bash” and “judge” people. He was particularly disappointed in his own minister, who has visited his sick father only once in recent memory. He nevertheless affirms that religion remains very important in his life: “[y]ou know, I think that before I, before we do anything, we should think about what would, you know they have the saying ‘what would Jesus do,’ you know.” He wishes he were active in a church youth group, reasoning, “I think it would be

pleasing to God a little more, you know.” He reads the Bible “at church” and believes in heaven and hell, miracles, angels, and demons, but he doesn’t pray a lot.

Jarrold first experienced sexual intercourse with “just a friend.” His views on sexual morality could be labeled situational: “[i]t depends on um, the time, the place, and all that. All that’s a factor, you know. It all depends. I mean, um, I think it’s, I do think it’s bad, but I think it’s something that most of us can’t help, you know. It’s chemical, you know, hormones.” Jarrold is also uniquely old-fashioned in at least one way: his disdain for *public* expressions of physical affection, as an apparent act of respect for his elders.

When asked about what sorts of sexual behaviors are OK for adolescents, Jarrold responds that it all depends upon where—geographically—you are:

I think it all depends on the place. If you’re by yourself, whatever, you know. But if you’re in public, nothing. [*You said whatever, so what do you mean by whatever? ‘Cause that’s a big range.*] Whatever, like um, whatever. You want me to get that specific? [*If you don’t mind.*] . . . Kissing, you know, the whole cuddling thing. You know, sex, maybe even oral sex, you know.

As in other interviews, we asked him about whether adolescents should wait to have sex until they are married, or not: “[y]eah, of course I do, but like I said, [it’s] something you just can’t help.” Concerning emotional readiness, Jarrold responds:

I don’t think teenagers are emotionally ready for it, period. But I think it’s just something that happens, you know, physically, that they, physically I think they are ready for it. . . . But emotionally, they’re not. [*OK.*] But physically, you know their body’s kind of ready for it, you know.

Losing his virginity to a friend was ideal, he thinks: “[m]an, it was cool, you know I mean, I felt like I was physically ready, but like I said, we weren’t boyfriend and girlfriend, so it wasn’t like I didn’t have to be emotionally ready. I mean ’cause there was no feelings attached, really.” Were his parents aware of his actions? “No. I don’t think, they don’t know about that person. But I think they know that I’m having sex. [*How would, or do you think they’d feel?*] Um, I think pops is like, he don’t care. But my mama’s gonna hurt if she found out.” Jarrold relays his brief interactions with his parents about sex: “[I]ike my mama’s telling me one thing, and my pop’s telling me something else. My pops would be like, ‘Just make sure you use protection.’ And my mama’s like, ‘Wait, wait,’ you know. But I never really talked to them about it.”

Jarrold reports no pressure to have sex, perhaps because the pressure is only felt prior to the “accomplishment” of losing one’s virginity. Jarrold acknowledges that his peers, together with his parents and television, do play a role in how he thinks about sex:

They [his peers] have made me want to try it, made me want to have it, but they never made me [actually do it], you know. They made me want to [do] that, knowing in my mind, you know, we was all like, we was gonna do it, you know, soon. And then one of my boys did it, and then I think I was next, and then my boy did it after me. [*How do you think TV’s influenced you, in the way you think about sex?*] Um, porno. Um, and like other movies and whatnot. That’s it. [*Like how do you think, I mean how has that affected the way you think?*] Um, it made me want to try it.

When asked about religion, Jarrold articulates a series of disembodied religious statements. That is, although he practices a religion, Jarrold suggests that church teachings about sex are both valid and yet not applicable to him. Does religion matter when it comes to sexual morality?

Yes. Yeah, yeah. They tell you, I don’t know what it tell you, but it say something about sex. I know it say something about fornication, yeah. [*Do you know what it says?*] About fornication? [*Yeah.*] They tell you not to, I think. I’m not sure, but I know it say something in the Ten Commandments. [*Do you think you’d agree with what your church would say, or what your religion would say?*] Oh, I agree. ‘Cause that’s, I mean ‘cause that’s what I govern my life by. So I, that’s the only thing I know. I don’t, I don’t agree or disagree. That’s what I live by, you know. [*OK, so let’s, so if it says that you don’t, that you’re not supposed to and you’re doing it anyway, then how do you deal with that?*] I just, just ask God to forgive me.

Justin

Justin is a 17-year-old Roman Catholic from an upper-middle-class suburb of Providence, Rhode Island. Although on the survey he reported a fairly high degree of religiosity, in person he too seems only nominally religious. He also appears mildly depressed with his life, though he actively tries to suppress this. His parents split up when he was three, and his mother remarried when Justin was in eighth grade, after living with his stepfather for at least a year. His stepfather is “such a different person than me that I don’t think there’s any way we could get along well.” By Justin’s account, his stepfather is to blame; he

“puts up a big barricade” to prevent a relationship: “I don’t really think he likes me.” As with most of the adolescents with whom we spoke, Justin claims to be friends with all sorts of people, that “there’s no one I don’t get along with.” His demeanor, however, is out of step with this claim.

When he was younger, and whenever he wasn’t at his father’s house, he would attend church with his mother: “[w]e’re pretty much every-week people.” His father is “Protestant” (no clarification) and his stepfather is Catholic, but neither is active. Unlike Kristin, who takes her religious faith in stride (if not seriously), Justin wishes he could escape his religious responsibilities. His religious sense is indeed shallow: “I’m not really a big fan of pondering the meaning of life here, so.” Later he confessed that “very few things interest me. . . . there’s not really much substance to my life right now, and if I think about that stuff [the purpose of life] too much I’m gonna be miserable.”

Justin perceives himself as honest; he doesn’t deceive, cheat, or lie. He is hardly happy, though. Recently arrested for possession of marijuana, he keenly feels the pressure of expectations on him: “[t]eenagers today are a lot more emotionally fragile.” In his assessment, parents couldn’t care less about their kids; they simply don’t pay attention, and Justin cannot conceive that they might.

The arrest has not diminished Justin’s interest in pot or alcohol. A sizable young man, “it takes a lot to get me puking.” He has nevertheless recently slowed a drinking-every-other-day habit (he doesn’t want a drinking offense on his nascent criminal record), but his marijuana use has increased. When asked how much his parents discipline him when they find out he’s done something wrong, he replies tersely: “They’re assholes. [*They’re assholes?*] Yeah, they suck. [laughs] [*Like, what do you mean?*] They just take my car and stuff. . . . it’s just like, come on, I didn’t do anything that bad.” Unlike Kristin, who finds her mother’s interest in her life annoying yet comforting, Justin evaluates his mother’s (and, to an extent, his stepfather’s) concern as entirely negative: “[t]hey make doing everything a pain in the ass.”

To Justin, religion is “something that hasn’t come into play with me yet. I think it probably will sometime . . . after I have a better understanding of the way everything works.” He *has* belief, but he feels no need to question much of anything: “[y]ou know, I’m Catholic, and I don’t really necessarily have to think about it [religion]. I don’t have to question it, ’cause, you know, it works.” He likes God, he admits, but doesn’t think much about religion. He does not disagree with church teachings; they just play very little active role in his life. They probably would later, “when you’re about to die.” A former priest of Justin’s was under fire in the wake of the priest sex scandal, but Justin still feels that the average priest is a good guy. He attended CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine; the standard Catholic religious education course), but it

was “just a chance to clown around on Sundays after church.” Ironically, at the conclusion of our interview, Justin speculates that he might “be a little bit better than I am now” when he hits age 50 or 60, and he might even be “one of the guys who teaches CCD or, you know, that type of thing.”

For now, though, Justin and his friends prefer edgy adolescent fare: music, parties, smoking, drinking, sex, and movies. Parties sometimes entail sex, but “unfortunately I’m not really in that part of, I’m not really, you know, like, into that.” Later, he puts it more frankly: “I haven’t really recently been too successful with, you know, girls.” This depresses him, because dating and sex clearly went together in his experience: “I’d be lying to you if I said, you know, I don’t want . . . some, you know, some pussy.” Justin has a less romantic view of sexual partnerships than do Ben or Kristin: “[p]eople become assholes when, when they get involved [sexually],” by which he meant that “involved” couples seem to treat each other poorly and cheat on each other. What are his opinions about sexual involvement? Girls who can’t “handle it mentally” shouldn’t do it. Otherwise, just “don’t be an asshole. Don’t, I don’t like making people feel bad. I mean, I feel bad when people get sad and especially if it’s my own doing.”

All of this was moot for Justin, since “unfortunately” he has not had sex for about a year. His senior year has been a disappointment in that area, with no imminent prospects. This gap in paired sexual activity should sound familiar to students of human sexuality: necessary resources (e.g., attractiveness, reputation) required to engage in sexual behavior often constrain sexual actors from accomplishing their goals (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels 1994). This is certainly the case for Justin.

Previous sexual partners have cheated on Justin. Though he claims this doesn’t affect him, his conversation is raw and revealing: “[n]othing’s [no girl is] important to me enough for me to have to, you know, lower my standards. . . . I’m not going to become their bitch, so you know, it’s not that big a deal to me.” While Justin denies ever participating in any unusual practices like group sex, he asks the interviewer if other adolescents had reported such involvement. While he doesn’t surf the Internet for pornography, he thinks there’s nothing wrong with it and has even invested in a set of X-rated DVDs. This in turn has brought X-rated junk mail to the house, prompting him to lie to his mother: “I was like, aw shit, mom, I don’t know how this happened. [laughs]” Pornography relaxes him, he claims: “[i]t’s a nice relaxing way to spend your afternoon.”

Christianity has nothing to do with how Justin thinks about sex. Unlike numerous other youths, however, he doesn’t report that Christianity teaches that sex outside of marriage is wrong. Instead, he suggests that Christian sexual morality is a social construction meant to curb natural, instinctual behavior in order to limit people’s fertility. Left unchecked, people would have too many babies, and at too young an age, and not be able to support them.

Carla

Carla is a 17-year-old evangelical Protestant girl from Florida. An average student and slightly overweight, she nevertheless conveys comfort with her own appearance. She was interviewed in her parents' restaurant, where she works. It's just her and her parents in the "close-knit" household (an older half brother is hooked on drugs and lives elsewhere). Carla was raised in a larger city but has since moved to a smaller town. She and her mother are close. Her father is an ex-Marine with war experience, a recovering alcoholic, and "a very structured, strict, you know, 'we want it done this way, now,' kind of guy." They get along well, and she's "daddy's little girl," but this role comes with some baggage. He prefers to have a schedule of her evening events before she goes out with friends, and she worries about how he will handle her future boyfriends. A recent cancer scare (for her) proved benign but still brought the three of them closer together and closer to God:

It [cancer] is one of those things that makes me wonder how people can't believe in God. Because, like, my family, that's the only way we got through it was praying together and just thinking, "you know, what's meant to happen will happen." . . . it really pulled us together rather than, you know, like everybody saying "Oh, why did God do this to her?" or "I hate God," you know.

Her parents were not Christians earlier in life. In fact, Carla came to faith before her parents did, after regularly attending church as a five-year-old with a friend. They all started off Baptist but now frequent a nondenominational church. Baptists dominate Carla's local religious scene, and she resents it. She is not given to politicizing religion, as she perceives her fellow Florida Baptists to be doing:

I mean it's just because we're in the Bible Belt of the South here, but it's, you know, I don't like feeling the influence that the Baptists put on you. You know, like I know that Disney had their Gay Day, but gay families deserve rights, too, you know. I mean like, and I guess that's the difference between me growing up in a big city and this small town here, you couldn't really see their small-town mentality. I know that being gay is wrong in the eyes of God, but at the same time, you're supposed to love everybody. So you know, I just don't like the idea of Baptists telling me what to do.

Carla is an advocate of outcasts and feels hostile toward adolescents who are judgmental about appearances: "I don't want to go somewhere with somebody [if] they're gonna be, 'oh, you can't talk to her' because she doesn't wear the

right clothes and all that stuff.” Such talk suggests she has been on the receiving end of haughty eyes. In fact, she thinks that personal appearance is one of the two biggest problems facing teenagers these days (the other one is sex):

There’s a lot of pressure on girls, I think more than guys, to look a certain way and to act a certain way. You know, you need to be 5’10”, weigh 110 pounds, have long, flowing hair and big boobs and you know all this other stupid stuff. And then when you don’t fall into that category, people just kind of look at you like you’re second rate. And then if you’re not real flirty and flighty and you know “ha-ha” all the time, then you’re not a fun girl, I guess, for the guys to be around.

Yet the stress of both fitting in and resisting the pressures to do so are taking a toll on Carla. She takes medication for clinical depression and writes down her feelings in a journal (her doctor’s recommendation).

Although Carla is very religious, and she articulates and confesses her belief in the traditional teachings of Christianity, she is not actually very active in her local congregation. She’s not in a youth group and only reads the Bible “if something’s weighing heavy on my mind.” Faith clearly makes a difference in her life. But it does not come easy to Carla; she has to work at it: “[i]t is a struggle because you really understand, like for anybody that says it’s not a struggle, then they don’t understand Christianity. Because there are so many little things that you don’t think about throughout the day that you do that are bad. [laughs]”

Carla occasionally sips alcohol (after all, “Jesus drank. He didn’t, you know, drink to get drunk”) but swears she will never smoke or touch drugs. Having had a brush with her own mortality, she thinks twice about her legacy before acting: “I would hate for my grandparents and my parents to be at my funeral saying, ‘Man, what a loser, you know. She died ’cause she just couldn’t resist.’”

She thinks that someday she’ll marry her boyfriend of two years, Philip, though for now they maintain clear sexual boundaries: “[t]alking about sex for us was kind of weird because I was like, I don’t even know if I should bring it up. But I didn’t want him to think that it would be OK, you know. Like no, we have limits and you just have to understand that.” He does, and they don’t, although they do kiss, which is OK: “[e]ven a little bit farther than that, but you know once you have to start getting in to the, I guess, the truly intimate moments, it’s just a little bit too far.” Philip “completely understands where I’m coming from and he agrees, so that makes it easy for the both of us.”

Carla’s parents are open and honest with her about sex, and she appreciates their candor. She is something of a sexual idealist, believing that if two people in love wait, the wedding night will be a grand one: “[t]hat just makes it more special, you know. I mean, your honeymoon will be an experience you’ll always

remember that way.” On the other hand, some adolescents, she thinks, date solely for the sexual benefits: “[t]his sounds horrible, but it’s no different than paying a prostitute [laughs], because it’s really all you’re doing, you’re just getting it free.” For her, sex is supposed to be the ultimate commitment:

[It’s] being able to say OK, I’m yours for the rest of my life. You have me completely, you know, 100 percent. And then if you’re married, and you get pregnant, it’s no big deal, you know. You’re already married and you’re ready for that. You’re ready for a family, but you know when you’re 16, 17 years old and you get pregnant, what a mess.

Her grandmother got pregnant before her own wedding, and the story has stuck with her: “[s]he said, ‘If I had it to do over again, I would’ve waited, because it was like, you know, bam, we’re married, we have no money . . . and we have a kid on the way.’”

Carla is one of the rare adolescents who clearly distinguishes religious from instrumental reasons for abstaining from sex, and sees merit in both: “I mean if you don’t do it for religious purposes, then you need to do it just, you know, for street smarts.” She applauds recent MTV ads promoting the use of contraception. Although Carla admits feeling pressure to look trim and sexy, ironically she doesn’t sense considerable tension over sex, even though she says many of her school peers are sexually active, “more so than their parents might know.” She doesn’t understand why so many youths are “willing to risk it all for what, like 10, 15 minutes of pleasure, I mean [laughs], it’s not like it’s all that long when you’re young. . . . it just seems like it’s overrated to me.”

She nevertheless resents the sexual double standard: “[s]ex is sex, and sleeping around is sleeping around. It shouldn’t matter who you are [or] what gender you are.” Indeed, Carla is something of an evangelical feminist. She’s strong-willed, caring, resentful of the small-town, double-standard pecking order based on beauty, and fed up with a Baptist moralizing that she’s convinced is only skin deep and at root, unbiblical.

EMERGING THEMES

There are important questions—especially about distinctly religious influences on sexual decision making—that excerpts from these six interviews with adolescents do not yet begin to address. Nevertheless, several themes are already becoming apparent, and others soon will. While not a summary of the book, these emergent themes are worth noting here.

First, the frenetic adolescent sexuality depicted in documentaries, films, music, and some scholarly books—wherein adolescents widely participate in casual sex, group sex, partner switching, pimping, etc.—is basically fiction. To be sure, one can always read about real-life examples of the bizarre. After all, sex sells. But as *New York Times* columnist David Brooks writes, “You could get the impression that America’s young people are leading lives of Caligulan hedonism. . . . You could worry about hookups, friends with benefits, and the rampant spread of casual, transactional sexuality. But it turns out you’d be wrong” (2005: 4–14). Brooks is right. Such accounts are indeed exceptional. Rumors of oral sex parties tend to be just that. Not all adolescents (or parents) think so, though, and many wonder about the “reality” of what they see on the big screen, as shown by Justin’s question to the interviewer about what other adolescents are saying. But the findings from most of the interviews suggest that adolescent sexual behavior in America tends to follow traditional patterns, namely, vaginal intercourse with someone of the opposite sex, with some proclivity for oral sex. Nontraditional sexual practices are rare among American youth, though I will present evidence to suggest that this is beginning to change.⁴

Toward this end, it is likewise critical to keep in mind the age-graded nature of sex. The sexuality section of our conversations with most 13- and 14-year-olds was short. Most have not had any type of paired sexual activity, and for many, sex is simply not on their radar screen. As for older adolescents, not all are sexually active or have even had sex yet, nor are they all that interested in sex. Follow-up conversations showed that the sex lives of 17- and 18-year-olds are often light-years different from what they had been just two years before.

Second, sexual activity among youth is often accompanied by feelings of ambivalence, sometimes buried under a mountain of positive peer affirmation. Kristin tells us that she has no regrets about losing her virginity—then losing her boyfriend—but the question of sex arises when we ask her about things she has done that she thinks might be wrong. Justin is clearly unhappy with his life, and not just because he hasn’t had sex lately. Valerie has done a good deal of emotional work to “reclaim” her virginity in some sense. Sex simply does not come without emotional strings for the majority of American adolescents, especially girls. As is apparent from Kristin’s account, many adolescents do a good deal of mental labor and normative affirmation in order to convince each other that coupled sexual activity during adolescence—a period of relational instability and immaturity—is, in fact, a good idea. Arousal may come naturally during adolescent development, but sexual happiness does not. For some, abstinence guarantees emotional stability. For others, it does not.

Third, religious involvement alone does not equal religious influence on sexual attitudes and behavior. For example, lots of American adolescents attend

church regularly or are involved in some sort of religion-oriented youth group (like Kristin's participation in Young Life). Yet such activities do not lead automatically to the attitudes and actions such religious organizations hope to propagate in their youth. Something more is required for religion to make a more apparent difference in the sexual lives of adolescents, and that something is elusive and defies easy description. It certainly involves the internalization of both a belief system and a religious identity. Valerie exhibits it. Kristin does not, despite both young women being involved in organized religion. There is a clear division between Kristin's life of faith and her emerging sexuality. Dating itself implies sexual involvement. Religion doesn't imply anything, except nebulous ideas about giving "order" to her life and teaching her to "respect" others. There is much more I will say about this later in the book.

Fourth, it is hard to live against the grain. Youth with sexually permissive friends or in schools where a high percentage of their classmates have already had sex have a more difficult time avoiding sex, even if they want to steer clear and even if they have the religious resources to do so. In other words, social context matters: what happens *around* teenagers—including the perspectives and behaviors of parents, siblings, peers, and friends—affects their lives, right down to their thoughts, attitudes, intentions, and actions. Very few adolescents admit that they feel pressured by friends. Instead, they tell us they are autonomous decision makers. But the pressure and its influence remains apparent to observers.

There are other themes that will emerge later in the book, including a discussion of the efficacy of abstinence pledging; the frequency, content, and influence of parent-child conversations about sex and contraception; sexual idealism; same-sex experimentation; what happens after virginity is lost; the gap between evangelical attitudes and practices; the phenomenon of "technical virginity," an emerging sexual ethic based less on religion than on social class; and a new way of thinking about how religion influences not only adolescent sexual behavior, but human actions of all sorts. Before we explore these themes, however, we would do well to understand something of how social scientists decide whether religion actually shapes adolescent decision making.