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# ON MASTURBATION: RELIGIOUS PURITY AND INSTITUTIONAL HEGEMONY IN ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS AND BUDDHISM

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the attitudes to masturbation in the Abrahamic religions and Buddhism. Textual interpretation has been used to scrutinize the primary sources within religious texts, while Weber's ideas on legitimacy and domination have been employed to elucidate the effect of religious injunctions against masturbation. The findings reveal that the primary sources used to condemn masturbation in Abrahamic religion is not clear, and so it should not be considered dogmatically. The interpretations of those sources draw connection between masturbation and such ideas as lust and impurity, which are measured with reference to a spiritual elite. Buddhism sees sexual desire in relation to suffering that must be able to overcome for those who desire enlightenment. Though its theological background is different the Buddhist examples help clarify the Abrahamic worldviews on masturbation. Moreover, the holy status of Catholic priests and Buddhist monks, who are viewed as a spiritual elite, is achieved by abstaining from sex and masturbation, and this hierarchy serves to designate as sinful and impure the practice of masturbation.

**Keywords:** masturbation; religious purity; religious hierarchy; abrahamic religion; Buddhism

## Introduction

The topic of masturbation is becoming more studied and discussed in the academic field in general. Although, from a religious perspective it has been neglected or avoided. The primary texts of Abrahamic religions do not directly discuss it, which makes this phenomenon unclear and also shows the importance of examination. This study will examine: (1) negative views on masturbation, (2) positive impacts of masturbation, and (3) masturbation as freedom from the power of social institutions over the individual's body. Religion, besides seeing masturbation as sinful, also employ modern sciences to convince followers of the negative effects of masturbation, connecting it to addiction and secularizing its condemnation from the language of sinfulness to sickness.<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Boteach wrote the book "The Broken American Male" to portray the dangers of masturbation contending that it leads males to a state of numbness and emotionless non-feeling.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Tsuria Ruth' scholarly work mentions a Jewish religious website that is dedicated to solve the problem of pornography addiction.<sup>4</sup> Many recent medical studies of masturbation suggest that it contributes to sexual health,<sup>5/6</sup> however, many religious people tend not to believe in such studies.<sup>7</sup> One particular threat to religion and its forms of hegemony, is the fact that masturbation can be seen as a power that one has on his/her own body, which is beyond religious control. For example, if women is satisfied by masturbation and does not want to marry, they will free from male domination.<sup>8/9</sup>

Two research questions are raised in this paper as followed: (1) how have Abrahamic and Buddhist texts talked about masturbation? and (2) What are moral and social consequences of abstaining from masturbation? This paper is organized into main two parts. First, *From Ambiguity to Impurity*: demonstrates unclear explanations of masturbation in the primary sources of Abrahamic religions, which eventually lead to borrowing some words from other parts of the texts as well as commentaries. This part simply proposes that the unclear notion of the primary texts opens an opportunity for religious scholars to portray the negative figure of masturbation. However, when additional explanations

are added, it helps to eliminate the dogmatic faith and represent the rational aspect of Abrahamic religion. Interestingly, those explanations are similar to Buddhism, a non-theistic doctrine, in terms of not holding God as a creator and savior. Second, *Angelic Soul in Human's Form*: elucidates the sacredness of Catholic and Buddhist priests that has been shaped through abstaining from masturbation. This kind of discipline eventually helps to stabilize the monastic institutions which are in the higher status of religious community.

### **From Ambiguity to Impurity**

As mentioned above, the term masturbation is not mentioned explicitly in the primary texts of the Abrahamic religions. However, various stories have been interpreted to support its condemnation. In the Biblical tradition, the story of Onan becomes a main narrative. Onan was required to marry and conceive a child with his brother's widow (Genesis 38:6-10). However, Onan disobeyed by spilling his seed on the ground and he was finally punished by being put to death. It is not clear that this story refers to masturbation as it may refer to "coitus interruptus".<sup>10/11</sup> It is often claimed that Onan is killed for wasting his seed, and so this story has been used to condemn masturbation. Yet female masturbation does not involve the wasting of seed.<sup>12</sup> According to Torah tradition, impurity occurs when there is a loss of life-energy. The dead body, a woman's menstrual flow, and a man's ejaculation are examples.<sup>13</sup> It can be said that the blood and sperm seed themselves are symbolically not impure, but the loss of energy instead.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6, it states that "it is God's will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God." This refers to sexual immorality without clarifying whether what is denoted is homosexuality, adultery, or masturbation. And this is found in several other places such as Ephesians 5:3, Colossians. 3:5, and so forth. In the Testaments, the term "addiction or lust" is emphasized as

a negative behavior that is condemned (Proverbs 6:25, Matthew 5:28, and 1 Peter 4:3). In contrast, self-control is a desirable act of obedience to God and a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), an act that requires restraint, thought, intentionality, and delayed gratification. Traditional Islamic views hold that masturbation as a sin, for the same reasons found in Judaism and Christianity. However, it also provides a solution in Abdullah:3. The prophet said “O young men, whoever from among you can afford it, let him get married, for verily it is a means to lowering one’s gaze and protecting one’s chastity. And whoever cannot, let him fast, for it will be a shield for him.”

For the sake of social order, all religions tend emphasize the sanctity of marriage even though they may consider sexual activity negatively. “Be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28)” is a sentence often quoted by followers of Abrahamic religions. Heterosexual sex is promoted in order to support reproduction. Sex within marriage is still accepted even of it does not lead to reproduction, because it is often considered to prevent adultery.<sup>14</sup> In Judaism, in the *ketubah* (marriage contract), a husband should not take long journeys nor take a vows to abstain from sex for extended periods of time, because he has the responsibility to fulfill his wife’s sexual desires. In addition, sex should occur in the missionary position, in the dark, and with the least amount of talk<sup>15</sup>. Notably, the missionary position was promoted on the ground that it is believed likely to lead to pregnancy.<sup>16</sup> Since sex is a gift from God, the marriage bed should be honored, enjoyed, and visited (Hebrews 13:4 and 1 Corinthians 7:5). It is also a place where souls intertwine and unity occurs (Genesis 2:24). The Quran Chapter 2, Baqarah: 222 also supports such sex and only warns that it should be avoided during the period menstruation which is considered impure.

However, sex in Abrahamic religions should not be viewed in terms of worldly happiness or for personal lust, it is holy in the sense that people are following the word of God. As a result, there are warnings to avoid attachment to sex. Marriage, for Jesus, is viewed as being ordained by God (Matthew 19:4–5), but living a life avoiding sex, either by becoming

eunuchs or becoming celibate, is seen as a higher calling and praised as serving the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:12). Unmarried persons are similar to angels and sons of the resurrection (Luke 20:36). Similarly, Paul also appreciates the virgin life, but he also adds “if people could not exercise self-control, they should marry” (1 Corinthians 7:9). This can be seen in the Catholic tradition with its’ emphasis on celibacy and the monastic order.

The directives concerning masturbation in Islam is also not so clear. Islam recommends to those who cannot control their sexual desire to marry instead. This implies that masturbation is something to be avoided. Nonetheless, in practice, Muslims in many areas, like Saudi Arabia, do not consider masturbation as a sinful behavior (*haram* or *makrooh*). In contrast, it is often totally accepted (*halal*). In 2018, group of Saudi Arabians launched a Twitter campaign, titled “masturbation is halal” and it went viral. Some Saudi psychologists also confirmed that masturbation is a human need like the desire for eating and drinking.<sup>17</sup> In Al- Baqarah:187, it permits a man to have intercourse with his wife on the night of the fast. Being a ‘garment for one another’ is its metaphor. However, one of the criteria of fasting duties, apart from abstaining from consuming food and water, is also abstaining from sex.

Nonetheless, the notion of masturbation is quite clear in Buddhist primary sources. Buddhism categorizes its followers into two groups: monks and laypeople. Monks are those who dedicated to the monastic life, which is stricter and requires them to observe more monastic precepts. Masturbation is obviously prohibited according to the Vinaya Pitaka, Sanghadisasa:1. That is because a monk’s life should follow ascetic practices. They receive food from donations to dedicate more time to learning and meditating. So Buddhists still consider a monk’s masturbation as unacceptable. A layperson’s life on the other hand is more flexible. They must follow only five precepts: refrain from taking life, refrain from taking what is not given, refrain from the misuse of the senses (which includes adultery), refrain from wrong speech (or lying), and refrain from intoxicating substances (like alcohol). Notably, adultery

is clearly understood as a sexual intercourse outside marriage. Therefore, masturbation, for lay Buddhists, is widely accepted by laypeople in Buddhism.

Remarkably, Buddhism categorizes the moral life into two levels as mentioned above because heaven and hell in Buddhism are not eternal. This means that a good action will cause a rebirth in heaven, for example, but one may also be reborn as a human, an animal, or a hell-being, based on previous actions. The cycle of rebirth or *samsara* cannot be ended as long as the person cannot eradicate all kinds of desire. Therefore, Buddhist teaching is flexible in the sense that it opens an opportunity for one to choose their level of morality. People can be reborn again and again to achieve some perfection, while the Abrahamic religions there is only one life to prove one's self and the last judgment seems to be final.

In Buddhism, one's pursuits of holiness is up to the devotee. This means that if they want to achieve a higher level of holiness and enlightenment, they can become ordained. In addition, Buddhism also provides the Eight Precepts for laypeople as an intermediate level, where masturbation is also prohibited (Pali: *abrahmacariya*). Of course, *abrahmacariya* covers all kinds of sexual activities: masturbation, pornography compulsion, sexual intercourse with humans as well as with animals. The reason is to reduce one's craving or lust. It should be noted that Buddhist teaching is based on the karmic law, in which all sufferings and happiness are from the results of their own actions, not from God, (although some do interpret this law as God). Buddhism views the cause of suffering as desire (MN:105). Therefore, one's duty is to eliminate desire through different levels of moral conduct.

It can be said that Buddhism ultimately views masturbation as negative or impure as well in terms of an obstacle for spiritual development. This is similar to the Christian view in Matthew 5:28, "looking at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Of course, abstaining from sex during the fasting period of Muslims is also not different. One of many points that Abrahamic people criticize ascetic religions like Buddhism and Hinduism based upon this

ascetic emphasis on not having sex or becoming celibate. In fact, if we go back to the root of this doctrine, sexual desire is to be eliminated, so purity will be gained for body and ultimately mind. Simply put, Buddhism just proposes the way to eliminate craving at various levels without referring to God's command. While Abrahamic religions agree with some ascetic levels in spiritual practice, while others, Judaism and Islam, choose to promote domestic life.

This section should be concluded with some observations on circumcision. Some suggest that the purpose is not only for cleanness, but to prevent people from masturbation as well. Circumcision is practiced by Abrahamic devotees for the sake of tradition and is mostly explained with reference to maintaining cleanliness. But this explanation is questionable. That is because even if a man is not circumcised, to clean his penis is not a difficult task. So some scholars believe that the main aim of circumcision is actually to prevent men from masturbation, which is considered as an impure behavior. That is because when the penis's skin is cut off, masturbation is more difficult. This becomes clear when we look at circumcision as tradition or culture. In many parts of Africa, Asia, and Middle East, various groups of people who believe in Christianity, Islam, or local religions also hold circumcision as a part of their culture. Beside the male children, girls must also be circumcised based upon the reason that it helps to reduce sexual desire and prevents them from masturbation.<sup>18</sup>

### **Angelic Soul in Human Form**

In traditions like Catholicism and Buddhism, asceticism is promoted for the religious elite. This is for the purpose of transforming the human body into angelic soul, and to allow priests and monks to gain from their self-discipline. In fact, The Jewish belief also portrays some groups of ascetics in Book of Numbers 6:1–21, who did not cut their hair, abstained from eating meat or grapes, abstained from wine, as well as fasting and living as a hermit.<sup>19</sup> This can be seen likewise in Sufi Islam. Ascetic Sufis were hunted both by Sunni and Shia rulers in various

centuries due to the accusation of being heretic.<sup>20/21</sup> However, asceticism in Christianity especially in Catholicism can be traced to the lives of John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, as well as the twelve apostles and the Apostle Paul and it is finally institutionalized as witnessed nowadays.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, this kind of practice is popular in Indian religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Buddhist monks to this day still practice asceticism.<sup>23</sup> Notably, though Hinduism was started since 3000 BCE., acetic practice or *sharmana* may begin during 600-400 BCE., which is the period of arising of Buddhism and Jainism.<sup>24</sup>

Abstaining from masturbation is a primary way to inner transformation. Catholicism and Buddhism share the same concept of ascetic practice in the sense that human body is generally seen as a subject to death, but religion can provide immortal life even before death by proposing “living the angelic life” through various monastic practices. In general, the term angel symbolizes a being that does not age, get sick, or die. In Christianity, Luke’s version of the story of Christ can be used to affirm that the life of the resurrection was also available before death, as it wrote “indeed, they cannot die anymore, since they (unmarried persons) are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection (Luke 20:36). It can be said that the death can overcome only the physical body and the sinful man. Referring to the Bible story of a woman who married with seven husbands, the question was asked who she will marry in heaven, to which Jesus replied, “at the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage, they will be like the angels in heaven (Matthew 22:29-30). Virginity is emphasized in Christianity since the life of Mary and the coming of Jesus was considered possible without sexual intercourse. Therefore, these ideas legitimate ascetic practice in Catholicism.<sup>25</sup> In Buddhism, five hindrances are obstacles to spiritual development started with “sexual desire” or *kamachanda*. It includes all kinds of craving, sex, masturbation, delicious food, luxurious material objects, and so forth (AN 5:51).

Since the next life is unseen, living a holy life or to achieve an angelic is the highest goal for Catholic priests. Protestantism however



sees celibacy as unrecommended, and promotes the idea to be fruitful and multiply,<sup>26</sup> Protestants, nevertheless, follow a protestant ethics (and spirit of capitalism) to assure their next life by showing the worldly wealth and success as a measure of their selection by God.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Buddhism suggests a way to transform this physical body into the angel soul (or mind) as well. The term *brahmacariya* means “angelic behavior” used to identify a moral code that abstains from all kind of sexual desire. Therefore, Buddhists who follow such intermediate and highest levels of moral conducts are defined as those who are like angels or *brahma* in this very life.

The development of asceticism is interesting when it has been shaped the monastic organizations as we see nowadays. Catholic priests and Buddhist monks position themselves as a spiritual elite, while ordinary people, involved in a life of domestic duties, are considered as followers. Undeniably, the priest’s status is elevated because, they can express their superiority based upon their self-discipline. Women can also elevate their status by serving Christ and becoming ordained. Their status will be higher than ordinary men, but they still cannot be equal to the male priests.<sup>28</sup> In addition, though the primary texts does not directly support it, the practice of confession has become central in Catholicism. By the thirteenth century, annual confession had become a requirement for the Catholics.<sup>29</sup> In Protestantism and Islam it exists to a certain degree, but it is not important due to the idea that individuals are able to communicate with God directly, and forgiveness must be from God only.

Because of this institutional hierarchy in Catholicism and Buddhism, the clergy becomes a medium between humans and God. In Buddhism laypeople tend to view Buddhist monks as holy, therefore donating to the temple can produce the good karmic results much more than donating to secular organizations. In this regard, abstaining from masturbation, as well as other kinds of sexual activities, should not be seen as the way to purify the soul only, but it also paves the way to shape the holiness and moral legitimacy of priests in the higher level of religious community, which can be called “traditional domination” as suggested

by Max Weber.<sup>30</sup>

As already mentioned, Judaism and Islam tend to emphasize domestic life, so institution of the priest is therefore not as strong as Catholicism and Buddhism. Islamic clergies are said to resemble Jewish rabbis and not priests. In this regard, they serve as exemplars, teachers, judges, and community leaders, who provide religious knowledge and lead the rituals.<sup>31</sup> *Imam* is a leader in ritual performance, while *Ulama* is considered as a Muslim scholar. Some scholars point out that religious leaders in Islam are poorly institutionalized and not organized hierarchically, because Islamic teaching does not separate religious duties from worldly life.<sup>32</sup> However, this claim can be argued that Muslim communities in many areas, Indonesia for example, are quite hierarchical. Imam and Ulama, of course all of them are male, play a leading role in religious issues. When religion is not separated from the worldly life, it means that almost every activity needs to be guided by Islamic teaching, and of course, based on interpretations of those leaders. In practice, they are in the position of being respected and should not be questioned. In some cases, they encourage, although indirectly, devotees to protest against other religious groups, Ahmadiyya for example. In addition, to serve the local beliefs, Muslim leaders also deal in magic, and some may be seen as charismatic. As a result, the hierarchical aspect of Muslim leaders and their organization is in some cases no different from Buddhism and Catholicism. What makes them different from ascetic religions is its characteristic of non-celibacy, while the leaders' legitimacy can be gained through the status determined by the scriptures.

All of these interpretations of holiness, impurity, and the higher status of celibate, has an effect on the ordinary person. It has a dominating effect on the freedom of the ordinary person over their own bodies.

## **Conclusion**

It is quite difficult to imagine the reason why the Abrahamic prophets at that time did not directly talk about masturbation. Two causes can be assumed here; (1) masturbation was already viewed as a taboo in

terms of impurity and should be prohibited as other sexual misconducts, homosexuality, sex outside marriage, coitus interruptus, and so forth. (2) Masturbation is probably viewed as a private activity or a minor sin. Therefore, religions tend not to take it too seriously. Of course, many modern scholars do not view it sinful (Foster, 1985) and most theologians view it as a minor sin.<sup>33</sup> However, when religion tries to control all the activities of its devotees, theological interpretations must be employed to fulfill that task. This eventually leads to the condemnation of masturbation by connecting it with impurity, lust or addiction.

Notably, Abrahamic religions and Buddhism are similar in the sense that they seem to differentiate moral conduct into two levels. Marriage is recommended for those who still want to be involved with the worldly life, while celibacy is reserved for the higher level. Of course, abstaining from sexual activity of Muslims on Ramadan implies the impurity of sex even though the full-time celibacy is not recommended and the monastic life is not available as a choice as is the case in Catholicism and Buddhism. This is interesting when the Buddhist view provides the same explanations, which is not based on the idea of God's command, but is based solely on spiritual aspects like suffering and dependent origination. Having compared the worldviews on masturbation, it finds some similarities between Abrahamic religions and Buddhism when some roots of given reasons are scrutinized. In addition, when self-discipline, becomes equated with abstaining from masturbation, it validates a hierarchical priest-led organization, and can lead to various types of domination of domestic life.

## ENDNOTES

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