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# FIRST THINGS

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## THE PORNOGRAPHIC DOUBLE-BIND

by  
Mark Regnerus

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**F**orty-three percent of American men (and 9 percent of women) now report using pornography within the past week. It's not an adolescent thing, either, as data from the new *Relationships in America* survey reveals. For men, porn use peaks in their twenties and thirties before beginning to diminish slowly. Indeed, sixty-year-old men are only slightly less likely to have viewed pornography within the past week than men in their twenties and thirties.

Among women, there is a more linear downward trend in pornography use with age. While 19 percent of women under age thirty report porn use in the week prior to the survey, only 3 percent of women in their fifties say the same. The challenge invades congregations as well: 26 percent of weekly church-attending men reported porn use within the past week.

Some experts assert that simple craving for sex is what's behind the desire for porn. Others cite darker motives. Explanations provide only modest comfort to the many women, (and not a few men) who wrestle over the meaning of their spouse or beau's pastime. They feel hurt, if not cheated on. Revelations of pornography use end an unknown number of relationships, including plenty of marriages and many courtships. (Porn use is not, however, a top-ten reason for seeking divorce, as some have erroneously asserted.)

Contrary to what is sometimes asserted, women have the right to be annoyed or upset by porn. It's not a good thing. It's spiritually draining. But we often overlook another casualty of pornography (and the human reaction to it): relationships that fail to launch. Breaking off a relationship because of pornography

use can be a rational, justifiable, and moral reaction to a problem—the predilection for peering at nudity online—but such actions contribute in ways not often noted to our broad retreat from marriage.

I recently observed an online dispute over the matter of men, marrying, and pornography. A crestfallen young woman discovered her boyfriend “struggled” with pornography. I’m never quite sure what “struggling” actually means, since it can be code for anything from shame at taking pleasure in women’s naked beauty all the way up to addiction to hardcore pornography. (There’s a difference.) This young woman elected to remain in her relationship, but she counseled other women to consider the path of least resistance—leaving. Departing, she suggested, is the best option.

It wasn’t the first time I’ve encountered this. Not long before that, I sat around a campfire with a couple dozen enthusiastic young adults, listening to the women recount their list of relationship deal-breakers—porn was of course one of them—while the men sat by sheepishly.

While I’m sympathetic to their concern, I can also promise you that widespread departures—given the dour numbers on porn use—will only accelerate the flight from marriage in the Church and is likely to backfire on women (as many things tend to do in the domain of relationships) who would leave for pastures that may well not be greener.

I would never dream of telling anyone—devoid as I am of information about particular situations—what they ought to do about their boyfriend’s roving eye. However, I have no trouble or qualms in declaring that collectively a categorical call to leave spells doom. Young adults are waiting longer and longer to marry, and fewer are doing so.

To counsel further flight is like asserting that our Christian ancestors should have headed to the hills, as wealthy Romans did, to avoid the plague. You can’t flee far enough, and the Church grew by gutting it out, staying put, and caring for the sick. On the matter of men and pornography, the data suggest you cannot flee far enough. Lots of “prudent” decisions to leave will still lead us to the same place—a widespread marriage avoidance. There’s nothing wrong with being unmarried, but we fool ourselves if we think this is the obvious solution.

Male sexual behavior, always a bit difficult to pin down in one place, is moving steadily now in a direction either free of partners or else devoid of long-term commitment to just one woman, aided at every turn by technology. Outside the Church, the revolution runs uncontested, as account after account continues to reveal. Inside the Church, we still seem to have trouble admitting that men are attracted to naked women.

I've said it before: The bottom line is that porn is cheap sex—meaning that it mimics real sex at no cost and no effort, and that many men will track in that direction unless prevented from doing so. And when sex becomes cheap, or alternatives are substituted (as in porn), women get put into a bind. They want to be in a relationship with men, but the men suddenly have more sexual options. Hence (many) women feel compelled to negotiate over things, like porn, that they would never have imagined in the past.

But the gritty reality remains—the Church will have to learn how to navigate this, and press forward with grace and truth. Men and women have to forge relationships—marriage—with each other recognizing human weakness and fostering each other's sanctification. While pornography is certainly a problem, we cannot collectively bail on marriage. It's too important to the future of the Church. Without a marrying culture in the West, chastity will falter on a scale we have not yet seen.

*Mark Regnerus is associate professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Austin.*

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