

GUIDES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

This guide (and others in the series) is an initiative of the Office of the Bishop and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. It is intended to help church members consider how they might respond to contemporary ethical issues. It is meant for use in personal reflection and is not an 'official' statement of the church on the topic. I am grateful to Nick Schwarz, Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, for his ongoing work on this project.

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1 July 2022*

PORNOGRAPHY

Learn about pornography

Definitions

Pornography is sexually explicit videos, photographs, and written material intending to stimulate sexual arousal.

By using pornography, we mean:

- viewing it alone or in the company of others for the purpose of sexual stimulation
- viewing it while stimulating oneself sexually (ie masturbating)
- sharing it with others
- profiting from it in some way.

The sexualisation and 'pornification' of popular culture

In recent decades, popular culture – including advertising, magazines, books, movies and fashions – has become increasingly sexualised. 'Sex sells', as the marketing slogan goes. Images that would have been regarded in the past as indecent or obscene are today presented for general exhibition. With the gradual intrusion of softcore porn into popular culture, the porn industry has responded by going more hardcore.

Although porn has been around for millennia, its production and consumption has exploded in recent decades. Globally, the porn industry is worth billions of dollars annually. Advances in internet and smartphone technology have made it easy to access porn and share it around and helped the porn industry reach new consumers, including children. The porn industry constantly looks for clever ways to introduce porn to adults and children and turn them into regular consumers. For example, it offered free access to pay-per-view content during the COVID-19 pandemic knowing that people would be spending more time online at home. Virtually all Australian teenagers have seen porn by age 18, and at least half of those were first exposed to it when they were 11 or younger.

School sex education programs have become more 'pro-sex' over the years and neutral or positive in relation to sexual experimentation by teenagers. But as porn has become the main source of instruction for children in matters of sex, schools are now having to address some of the harmful beliefs and attitudes that porn has taught them.

Porn industry public relations strategies

Porn is associated with human trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation. Women involved in porn are forced to do things against their will and pretend they enjoy it. Porn is associated with sexually transmitted diseases, high rates of drug and alcohol abuse, and mental illness and self-harm. Porn typically involves men viewing and getting sexual gratification from experiences that the women involved found painful, traumatic, degrading and humiliating.

The porn industry works hard to cover up these realities and justify itself. It aims to normalise porn and remove its stigma. It counters criticism by appealing to 'freedom of expression', 'freedom of choice' and the 'perils of censorship'. It denies or minimises porn's harmfulness, claiming that it is 'therapeutic', 'educational', 'liberating', 'empowering', even 'ethical', and denying that porn has any link to dysfunctional relationships and crime. The porn industry has friends in academia and politics who help to defend its existence and activities.

The porn industry encourages people to believe that everyone has a right to sexual gratification and that life without sexual gratification is empty, joyless and worthless. It portrays the Christian ideal of sexual purity outside of marriage as unrealistic, unnatural and harmful.

Porn and addiction

Porn is designed to cause sexual arousal. Sexual arousal activates a part of the brain commonly called the 'pleasure centre' or 'reward centre'. The reward centre responds by releasing a feel-good chemical called dopamine. Dopamine creates an intense desire or craving for the thing that triggered its release. Porn addiction occurs when a porn user's craving for arousing imagery and the high it produces is stronger than the user's power to resist it.

Porn use rewires the brain. Images that at first produce intense arousal soon fail to produce the same response. The user becomes desensitised or habituated to them. The user needs new, stronger and more shocking material to produce the same degree of arousal. Eventually, arousal can only be produced by images that are extremely explicit or shocking, eg which involve aggression, violence, degradation or violation of taboos like incest or involvement of children or animals.

The porn industry recruits users by offering free access to a large amount and variety of online porn. It makes money from addicts by keeping the most deviant and degrading imagery behind paywalls and charging for access to it.

Like other addicts, porn addicts try to justify their behaviour. They tell themselves it is harmless, that it is not affecting their relationships or work and that they are still in control.

Like other addictive things, porn use can easily become a way of dealing with stress – a self-soothing activity. But because porn-use rightly causes feelings of guilt and shame, it tends overall to increase stress, not reduce it. Overcoming porn addiction, therefore, involves finding better ways to deal with stress.

The effects of porn

On users and their families

The changes that porn causes to the brain damage users' ability to think logically, exercise self-control and make sound judgements and decisions. Users often become secretive, reclusive and unreliable, preferring to spend most of their time alone on the internet and lying to hide what they are doing.

Because porn use diminishes the ability to make important life choices and commit to them, users are less likely to:

- socialise and meet new people
- commit to courses of study or careers
- become financially independent and move out of their parents' home
- travel
- look for suitable life partners to court and marry.

Porn disconnects sex from love, intimacy and relationship. It shapes users to view women and girls as sex objects. It trains boys and men to want to act out the misogynistic, coercive and sexually violent things they have seen. When users pressure their wives or girlfriends to engage in 'porn sex' or unfavourably compare their appearance to female porn stars, the chances of the relationship ending in separation or divorce dramatically increase. For women, discovering their boyfriends or husbands are porn users is usually traumatising. They typically feel betrayed, rejected and undesirable.

Porn kills users' ability to be aroused by girlfriends or wives and their capacity to engage in loving and respectful sexual intimacy with them. Erectile dysfunction – once considered a problem of older men – is now occurring in young men and teenagers who cannot get an erection or sustain one without exposure to porn.

On children

Exposure to porn during childhood corrupts children's understanding of sexuality, intimacy, loving relationships and acceptable behaviour. It raises children's risk of:

- acquiring sexist attitudes and seeing girls and women as sex objects
- inappropriate sexualised behaviour
- acquiring sexually transmitted diseases
- developing mental health problems
- pregnancy without the maturity and ability to care for a baby properly.

Even more alarmingly, exposure to porn is a major factor in sex offences against children committed by other children. It also makes children vulnerable to sexual predators – paedophiles frequently expose children to porn in the process of grooming them for sexual abuse.

Porn teaches boys to expect girls to behave the way they see women acting in porn and treat them the way they see women being treated in porn. Porn teaches that male aggression and violence in sex is normal and that women like it. Porn teaches girls that to be attractive to boys, they must look and behave like female porn stars, eg by removing pubic hair, getting cosmetic surgery, dressing and acting provocatively, and submitting to whatever sexual fantasies boys want to act out. Porn teaches young people to produce and share their own sexual imagery via sexting. Often, they only learn how foolish, short-sighted and harmful sexting can be after being blackmailed or publicly humiliated when the images get into the hands of people they were not intended for.

Porn sets boys up to feel like failures by giving them unrealistic expectations of male sexual ability. It sets up girls to feel like failures too. Girls will wonder why they don't experience the same ecstasy they see women apparently experiencing in porn, once again, not understanding that acting does not necessarily reflect reality.

On wider society

We are still only a couple of decades into our society's experiment with the mass consumption of porn that began with the invention of the internet and then the smartphone. But because we know the harm porn does, especially to the ability of men and boys to make commitments and take on responsibilities, establish and maintain successful careers and become good husbands and fathers, we can confidently predict that the effects on our society will be negative.

Examine pornography and the use of pornography from a Christian ethical perspective

Pornography is a huge temptation for young people today. Most will be exposed to it, and many will fall into it to some degree. They are not alone. Even notable people in the Bible like King David and Christian saints like Augustine of Hippo fell into sexual sin. So, where do we start when considering pornography from a Christian perspective?

For Christians, God is the ultimate authority. The clearest source of his will for us is his word, the Bible. While the word 'pornography' does not appear in the Bible, the Bible does deal with many porn-related topics, such as indecency, obscenity, sexual immorality, temptation and lust. It has much to say about God's will in relation to sexual relationships between men and women.

God wants us to love other people the way he loves them: as beings with inherent dignity because God created them in his own image and loves them so much that he became a human being – Jesus of Nazareth – who died on a cross, so they might be saved. Porn has nothing to do with love. It trains people to be selfish and emotionally detached, which reduces their chances of ever establishing faithful, committed, selfless and loving relationships. It trashes human dignity. It dehumanises and exploits its victims. It reduces them to objects to use and discard. Everyone associated with the production and consumption of porn is degraded by it.

The Bible teaches that sex is a special gift from God. God has clearly stated, however, that the only proper place for this gift is within the context of a loving and respectful marriage between a mature man and woman. Husbands and wives give this gift to each other to strengthen the intimate bond of love between them and, in so doing, may bring children into the world. Porn not only takes God's good gift of sex out of its proper context and exposes it for all to see, but it also explores every conceivable way of desecrating it.

God sees what we do when nobody else is looking and knows what we are thinking about (see, for example, Psalm 139:2). He understands we experience feelings of temptation. Feelings of temptation are not in themselves sinful. But it is sinful to give in to temptation, eg by gazing lingeringly on another person and indulging in lustful thoughts about them (see God's commandment against coveting in Exodus 20:17; see also the story in Genesis 39 of how Joseph resisted an attempt to seduce him). Jesus was even tougher on lust. He equated indulging in lustful fantasies with breaking God's commandment against adultery (Exodus 20:14). He said, 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery". But I say to you, everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart' (Matthew 5:27–30).

Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit ... You are not your own; you were bought with a price. Therefore, honour God with your body' (1 Corinthians 6:19,20). God calls us to be good stewards of his gift of sexuality by using it in accordance with his will. He wants us to be holy, not to degrade ourselves and others sexually. Just a few lines earlier, Paul had laid down the law, warning that the sexually immoral would not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9,10). However, he immediately followed that warning with the good news that God saves and makes holy, clean and acceptable all wrongdoers who ask forgiveness for their sins and believe and follow him (1 Corinthians 6:11). (See also the Parable of the Lost Son, Luke 15:11–32, and the story of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, John 8:1–11.) In Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus, he spoke of the need to 'put on the armour of God' to resist the forces of evil.

Following the Christian way of abstinence until marriage is difficult, perhaps especially so in our current culture, which is saturated with sex, normalises premarital sex, and where the average age for both men and women to marry is now over 30 years old. However, using porn to 'alleviate sexual frustration' is not the solution. Young people who are not ready to marry but wish to do so in the future do well to focus their attention on bettering themselves (eg through education and community service) and preparing a good foundation for a trusting and loving marriage.

Make a decision and act on it

There is no Christian ethical justification for viewing porn. God calls us to say no to porn, even though our contemporary culture makes light of it. 'Ethical porn' is a contradiction in terms. The Christian choice is to:

- avoid exposure to porn wherever possible
- pray for strength to turn away from porn when exposed to it accidentally or involuntarily
- actively oppose the efforts of the porn industry to widen access to it and normalise it.

If a person is addicted to porn, the right way forward is to find a strategy that has a good success rate in helping porn addicts take back control of themselves. A good strategy will involve:

- acknowledging the addiction and need for help (including God's help!)
- identifying ways to face temptation and overcome it
- committing to persevere even when it is hard and even if there are failures along the way
- identifying needs currently being met by porn use (eg relief of stress)
- working out ways to meet those needs in healthier ways
- being accountable to a trusted person who is not a spouse or close relative.

Helpful resources for information and decision-making

Websites

- Fight the new drug, <https://fightthenewdrug.org/>, and its excellent three-part documentary series Brain Heart World, <https://brainheartworld.org/>
- Joinfortify, <https://www.joinfortify.com/>, a program for overcoming porn addiction
- Power over Pornography, <https://poweroverpornography.com/>, a website, book and program for overcoming porn addiction
- Truth About Porn, <https://truthaboutporn.org/>, a source of research on the harms of pornography

Australian reports

- eChildhood 2020 update: Statement of research relating to pornography harms to children, <https://www.echildhood.org/statement/>
- eChildhood 2019, Kids and Pornography in Australia: Mobilising a Public Health Response, available at https://www.echildhood.org/report_2019/
- The Porn Harms Kids Report: Protecting our kids from online pornography harms is everyone's business, 2017

Books

- Gail Dines 2010, *Pornland: How porn has hijacked our sexuality*, Beacon Press.
- Melinda Tankard-Reist 2011, *Big Porn Inc.: Exposing the harms of the global pornography industry*, Spinifex Press.
- Wendy Francis and Joy Weatherall 2019, *Turn, Think, Tell*, Connor Court Publishing (a book that provides a helpful strategy for children exposed to disturbing images).