Chapter 4

Motivating Sexual Decisions

Life in Lubbock, Texas, taught me . . . that sex is the most awful, filthy thing on earth and you should save it for someone you love.

—Butch Hancock

Sexual ideologies and standards vary across the globe (DeLamater 1989), and every society has means by which it attempts to control youthful sexuality (Brooks-Gunn and Paikoff 1997). Yet adolescent sexuality is not simply a raw force that would rage unchecked were it not for institutional social control. Far from being purely about physiology and testosterone, sex is cued by cultural scripts that shape what is "sexual" and who is sexually desirable (Ellingson 2004; Laumann et al. 1994).

In this chapter, I examine heterosexual attitudes and motivations, which are the precursors to actual heterosexual activity. The strongest associations between religion and anything related to sex appear here (Miller and Olson 1988; O'Donnell et al. 2003; Sieving, McNeely, and Blum 2000; Thornton and Camburn 1989). First, I explore the associations between religious youth and the idea of—and actually taking—a pledge to abstain from sex, the anticipation of guilt from sexual activity, and the belief that parents are hostile toward adolescent sexual activity. Second, I take an extended look at the abstinence pledge, its idealism, and whether or not it works. Third, I look beyond the right-or-wrong attitudes about sex to the host of other motivations to pursue or avoid sexual activity. Some motivations display strong associations with religiosity, while other motivations display more social class–based links. Finally, I conclude with an extended discussion of a key contemporary barometer of sexual preparedness: emotional readiness. What does it mean, who refers to it, and who thinks they are emotionally ready?

The Place of Attitudes and Motivations in Predicting Action

The theory of reasoned action proposes that decisions to engage in sexual activity are the function of sexual intentions, which are in turn the product of two things: personal attitudes about sex and perceived social norms about sex (Forehand et al. 2005; Gillmore et al. 2002). While not rocket science, the theory—when applied to the study of sex—provides a helpful clarification of a proper time order to the causal processes about religious effects on sex, which sometimes get lost in the variable and statistical models talk of social science. In other words, once we know something about what adolescents think about sex, their reasons for having or avoiding sex, and their intentions to act or refrain, we will better understand who acts sexually and why.

Many adolescents who want and intend to have sex nevertheless do not—or at least not as soon as they might prefer—and many who wish to long delay having sex nevertheless become sexually active. A recent longitudinal study of adolescents found that 37 percent of virgins who subsequently did have sex had planned *not to* when asked about their intentions a year earlier (Gillmore et al. 2002). Intentions to act are more proximate to actual decision making than are attitudes, motives, and perceived norms and thus tend to have a stronger effect on adolescents' sexual decisions (Gillmore et al. 2002). Unfortunately, I do not have measures of sexual intention in either the Add Health or NSYR data sets, so I am left to focus on its building blocks—sexual attitudes and motivations.

Pre-Premarital Sex

For a long time in America, the term "premarital sex" popularly referred to acts of sexual intercourse between a *couple* that occurred prior to the issuance of a legal marriage certificate binding them. The focus remained squarely on a pair of people who would eventually marry, either in front of the people of God, the eyes of God, the state, or some combination thereof. Indeed, pregnancies would often hasten weddings and could serve as the occasion for public confession in many congregations. No doubt many sexually-active-but-unmarried couples were not caught in the "act" of pregnancy and so evaded this painfully embarrassing experience. (This practice of confessing premarital sex is now rare, having gone the way of Sabbath blue laws and bans on playing cards.)

Today, however, premarital sex tends to refer to any act of sexual intercourse that occurs prior to a *person* getting married. Whether the sexual acts

occur with an eventual marriage partner, an old boy- or girlfriend, or a one-night stand is less important. John Gagnon and William Simon (1987) label this more accurately as "pre-premarital sex," since most contemporary adolescent sexual partnerships are not composed of eventual spouses. Premarital sex no longer means what it used to mean. And we should change how we speak about it, if in fact we don't mean it. What most people are actually referring to by the phrase is *nonmarital* sex—a sexual relationship that occurs outside of marriage and typically without marital intent. This would profitably distinguish it from both true premarital sex (sex between eventual spouses) and extramarital sex.

Regardless of terminology, there is no doubt that the expanding maturity gap is a primary contributor to the growing toleration of pre-premarital sex. By "maturity gap," I mean the increasing decoupling of marriage from physical sexual maturity in advanced industrial societies like the United States. Better nutrition during the twentieth century has contributed to a trend toward earlier menarche—girls' first experience of menstruation and the beginning of reproductive maturity. Boys' average age at spermarche—when sperm production begins—is about 14, while their average age at marriage is just over 26 (Brooks-Gunn and Paikoff 1997). Girls' average age at menarche is now under 13, and at marriage, just over 24. Together with cultural and economic emphases on acquiring more extensive (and expensive) education, and a trend toward career building and later marriage, these diverse forces combine to produce a significant lag between reproductive maturity and marriage in twenty-first-century America (Brooks-Gunn and Paikoff 1997). The maturity gap for both men and women now averages about 12 years and shows no signs of diminishing. Twelve years of sexual maturity is a long time to avoid sex, so most do not.

The trend affects everyone. Fewer and fewer religious individuals marry following high school, choosing instead to seek education and career stability before settling down. Thus, in contrast to previous generations, fewer of them are choosing to marry in order to legitimate their sexual activities. Over time, the actual prevalence of—and tolerant attitudes toward—premarital sex have increased. Yet it would be premature to say that the maturity gap has successfully altered opinions about premarital sex in *all* religious traditions. A comparison of General Social Survey (GSS) data on adults from 1972 through 1993 found evidence for a substantial decline in support for traditional beliefs about premarital sex among the general population, but *no* substantial decline among evangelical Protestants (Petersen and Donnenwerth 1997). Mainline Protestants and Catholics, though—regardless of attendance—exhibited increasingly tolerant attitudes toward premarital sex. During the 1970s, 51 percent of evangelical Protestants and 30 percent of mainline Protestants

indicated that a sexual relationship before marriage was "always wrong" (Wilcox 2004). By the 1990s, these two percentages had dipped to 45 and 21 percent, respectively. When we qualify this by examining only religiously active evangelical and mainline Protestants, the numbers rise to 63 and 34 percent, respectively (for the 1990s). One study notes that the gap in disapproval of premarital sex (between evangelicals and mainliners) has actually grown from about 20 to nearly 30 percent between 1972 and 2002 (Wilcox 2004).

Clearly, there has been a redrawing of the acceptable sexual boundaries for unmarried men and women within mainline Protestantism and, to some extent, Roman Catholicism. Active participation in church life tends to mitigate this somewhat, but not much. After all, only one in three mainline Protestants who regularly attend church unilaterally oppose premarital sex.

Delay Sex until Marriage?

The GSS, however, is a study of adults. What do adolescents, religious or otherwise, think about premarital sex? In the NSYR survey, we asked adolescents the question: "Do you think that people should wait to have sex until they are married, or not necessarily?" and they could respond with "Yes, they should wait," or "No, not necessarily wait." Their answers clearly vary by religious traits (see Table 4.1). More than seven out of ten evangelical Protestant adolescents respond with a "yes, wait" reply, topped only by Mormons, at 77 percent. Catholics, mainline and black Protestants, and adherents of other religious traditions are split nearly down the middle, while just under 30 percent of Jewish youth and unreligious youth support the idea of waiting until marriage.

Both forms of religiosity are powerful predictors, even more than religious tradition. Regardless of affiliation, 83 percent of youths who are in church more than once a week support waiting until marriage to have sex. Even those who attend once a week are considerably less likely to support this idea (by 16 percentage points). And only 35 percent of those who never attend religious services support waiting. The difference is even more striking when we compare the religious salience categories: only 23 percent of teens who say that religion has no importance in their daily life think waiting until marriage to have sex is the best idea, compared with 81 percent of teens for whom religion is extremely important. So both forms of religiosity (attendance and importance) show remarkably linear patterns in predicting support for waiting. Youth who align themselves (more or less) with the label "spiritual but not religious" are more ambivalent about waiting than youth who don't.

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Table 4.1 Attitudes about Waiting until Marriage to Have Sex and Perceptions of Parental Emotions (in Percentages), by Religious Variables

	Supports waiting until marriage to have sex	*Parents would be "extremely mad" if they had sex*
Religious Tradition		
Evangelical Protestant	73.7	66.7
Mainline Protestant	51.9	56.8
Black Protestant	54.8	46.8
Catholic	51.2	55.4
Jewish	27.0	48.6
Mormon (LDS)	77.3	79.7
Other religion	50.7	53.4
No religion	29.3	41.2
Church Attendance		
More than once a week	82.9	74.7
Weekly	66.2	66.5
Up to 2–3 times a month	48.5	50.3
Never	34.8	42.2
Importance of Religion		
Extremely important	80.8	74.7
Very important	67.2	60.5
Somewhat important	44.7	50.7
Not very important	30.8	42.0
Not important at all	22.5	37.2
Spiritual but Not Religious		
Very true	52.7	48.4
Somewhat true	48.4	51.0
Not true at all	64.5	63.8

Source: National Survey of Youth and Religion

Tonia is a 17-year-old daughter of a Jewish father and Christian mother. She regularly attends a Christian church and feels keenly alone in her commitment to waiting until marriage to have sex. Her friends, she notes, have a different criterion:

> I think I'm the only one in my circle of friends who believes in waiting. Um, my other friends kind of believe in the length of time you've been dating should decide when you should be ready. Like if you've been dating for a long

> time, they believe that you're more ready. But I think that waiting is the better idea.

Evangelical Protestant teens were much more likely to support waiting until marriage in their interviews as well as on the survey:

- "Marriage and sex is [a] great gift that God gave and so, and I think it should only be used then, when you're married."
- "It's the best gift that you could give to that person that you're going to spend the rest of your life with. So I definitely think it's worth waiting for."

Many of them, even including those who had already had sex, continue to convey the idea of sex as a gift and its ideal relationship with marriage (Carpenter 2005b). Cameron, a 15-year-old evangelical girl from Florida, remarks:

> I felt like I could, you know, do anything I wanted, and that led on to sex. But also I feel that I should have waited. . . . I don't regret doing that with that person, but like, I wish that I would have waited. We both say the same thing. [*Why do you wish you would have waited?*] Just, just for good, I guess. You know, like our beliefs. Because Christians think that way, like you should wait until you get married before you have sex.

Some evangelical youths were more sensitive than others to nuances, real-life circumstances, and varying situations. Hannah, a 17-year-old from Alabama, recognizes the ideal yet notes, "Everybody makes mistakes. So it's not always gonna happen that way. But it should come as close to that [waiting until marriage] as possible. At least engagement, I think."

While around 80 percent of evangelical youth support sexual abstinence until marriage as an ideal, only about half of all mainline youth say the same. The interviews reinforced this distinction. Megan, a 15-year-old religiously active mainline Protestant from Mississippi, says that religious teachings about sex were not only *not* forced by her church, but they weren't really spoken of at all: "[*Does your religion have any particular teaching when it comes to sex?*] Not that I've been told. They encourage, um, to save sex for marriage and stuff like that. But that's pretty much it; it's not forced."

Megan's flat response is remarkably like that of Jonathan, a 16-year-old mainline Protestant from Texas. He too struggled to come up with cogent religious guidelines about dating and sexuality. When I spoke with him two years later (at age 18), he had recently lost his virginity, an experience which he regretted. Although he wishes he would have waited, he cannot articulate

why, even when I press him. Clint, an 18-year-old mainline Protestant from Michigan who is a virgin and attends his church sporadically, takes into account unique social situations in fashioning his sexual ethic: "There's going to be exceptions to the rule where two 17-year-olds are really like, in love, and you know they think they're ready. Like I'm, I'm not gonna say 'oh well, no, that can't happen.' " Later in the same interview, Clint expands upon his ambivalence about waiting until marriage to have sex:

> There's no reason, um, that, you know, you should save yourself for marriage in every single instance, no exceptions. . . . You know it's, it's a situational thing. But um, I didn't find myself in that situation, and I think I'm kind of grateful for that, you know. 'Cause that's, again, one less thing to worry about in trying to figure out, you know, what's important to me and things like that.

It's no news flash that mainline Protestantism has become more tolerant of premarital and nonmarital sex. Most mainline Protestants live fairly traditional sexual lives but accommodate alternatives in reality, especially if those alternatives are practiced in private (Ellingson et al. 2004).

If the gap between mainline and evangelical abstinence ethics is widening, the one between the religious and the nonreligious is already a chasm. Kevin, an 18-year-old religiously unaffiliated adolescent from Maryland, is frank about his disdain for abstinence (although incorrect in his association of abstinence with higher subsequent divorce rates):

> [*Do you think young people should wait to have sex until after they're married or not?*] No. [*How come?*] Uh, I think it's something you need to know about before you get married. [*And you know about it when you, by being involved sexually with somebody . . .*] Yeah, it's, I guess it's an important part of a relationship. I mean you get married and then realize that it's not gonna work. You didn't have sex and then have to get divorced. Just seems like a waste, I think.

We also asked youths to estimate how upset their parent(s) would be if they found out they were having sex. Curiously, for those who guessed "extremely mad," the gap between evangelical Protestants and mainliners/Catholics is a good deal narrower than the gap in support of waiting until marriage. Regardless of their own views about abstinence, roughly about half of all youths (except evangelicals and Mormons) say their parents would be "extremely mad" if they were discovered to be sexually active. Again, both forms of religiosity reflect a linear pattern—the more religious the adolescents, the more upset they feel their parents would be with their sexual behavior. Nonreligious youth were much less concerned: only 37 percent of those who

completely devalued religion and 42 percent of youth who never attend religious services thought their parents would be extremely mad if they had sex, compared to 75 percent among the most religious. These numbers substantiate the claims of James and Jillian (from chapter 3), the nonreligious youths who report that their parents would be OK with their sexual activity.

Catholic and Protestant religious doctrines on sex are not remarkably different. So why the widening discrepancies in their sexual attitudes? It might appear that mainline Protestants and Catholics are *interpreting* the doctrines differently than evangelical Protestants. In reality, the average mainline Protestant or Catholic is simply less concerned than the average evangelical about *adhering* to the doctrines. Their lack of concern grows over time as well. Figure 4.1 graphs the percentage of NSYR virgins who support abstinence (waiting until marriage to have sex), by their age. Notice the almost-flat line for evangelical Protestants and how the other three slopes decline with age. Though evangelicals, mainliners, and Catholics start adolescence within about a dozen percentage points of each other, they hit the peak of adolescence (age 16) quite far apart in their attitudes about delaying sex until marriage. While 80 percent of 13-year-old and 16-year-old evangelical virgins support abstinence, the share of mainline Protestant youth who agree with them declines from 73 to 43 percent in those three years.

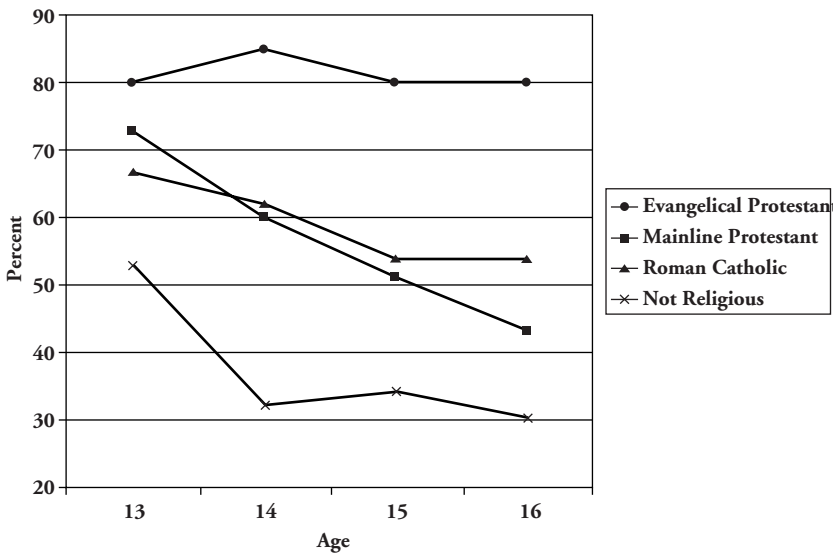

FIGURE 4.1. Adolescents Who Support Abstinence (in Percentages), Virgins Only
Source: National Survey of Youth and Religion

For mainline and Catholic youth, "the failure of a belief system to require conformity to orthodox doctrine clears the way for the adoption of views inconsistent with such doctrine. . . . [and] network participants who express liberal views about premarital sex are unlikely to receive frequent or strong negative sanctions for their views" (Petersen and Donnenwerth 1997: 1084). In other words, there is very little organizationally that prevents mainline and Catholic youth from changing their minds about sex. Many do not give up on idealizing abstinence, of course, but they are in the minority now—or very nearly so. Condoning sex before marriage remains off limits to the faithful evangelical, although as we will see in chapter 5, it is nonetheless practiced by plenty.

Taking the Pledge

Nowadays, most evangelical Protestant couples can safely see a movie or even dance without offending their church's sense of behavioral orthodoxy. Premarital sexual intercourse, though, remains a signifier against a well-lived adolescence (Hunter 1987). And some religious youth remain firm in resisting. Toward reducing instances of nonmarital sex, the "abstinence pledge" movement has emerged. This loosely linked group of interdenominational organizations encourages youth to take a public pledge to remain "pure" (sexually abstinent) until marriage, at which time the abstainer does not become impure, but rather sex becomes legitimate. Popular evangelical authors such as Josh McDowell and parachurch organizations such as True Love Waits, the Pure Love Alliance, and the Silver Ring Thing actively reinforce this notion by a variety of means—some religious and some pragmatic—including "promise rings," signed agreements, support groups, and topical Bible studies.[1] Ring ceremonies may involve hundreds of participants and include laser light shows and public pledges made in front of family and friends (Rosenbloom 2005). Event leaders affirm the sacred mystery and power of sexuality (White 2004). Then, employing a variety of methods, they warn adolescents about pregnancy and STDs, and typically claim that condoms will *not* protect them from pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Some leaders attempt to demystify or profane sexual intercourse by noting that "even my dog has sex." Outright scare tactics are not unheard of and sometimes include slide shows of the bodily damage done by (presumably untreated) sexually transmitted diseases (Ali and Scelfo 2002). Make no mistake, though—the abstinence pledge movement is no small undertaking: nearly 13 percent of Add Health Wave I respondents said they had taken such a pledge. Nationwide, the number of pledgers was estimated at one point at more than 2.5 million (Bearman and Brückner 2001).

While its popularity may wax and wane, the idea and the organizations promoting it are here to stay (Rosenbloom 2005).

A helpful way of understanding the abstinence pledge concept is as a "change in script." Organizations like True Love Waits accept the presumption that the norm among adolescents is to be sexually active. They in turn press adolescents to adopt this "new," alternative sexual script—that sex is best within the security of marriage—in the hopes of a verifiable drop in sexual activity among adolescents and an improvement in emotional and physical health among them. The underlying assumption of the abstinence pledge is consonant with social control theory—that adolescents naturally gravitate toward sexual activity like a magnet to a refrigerator door. I find this assumption unwise and unsupported by evidence. Some youth who take the pledge are sexually disinterested to begin with and at low risk for becoming sexually involved in the near future. Indeed, the pledge is most popular among younger adolescents, many of whom are just reaching puberty. The appeal of the pledge diminishes as the sex drive increases with age. Just under 20 percent of 12-year-olds had pledged abstinence at Wave I of the Add Health, while about 9 percent of 18-year-olds had. This is the case with evangelicals as well: 33 percent of evangelical 12-year-olds had taken the abstinence pledge, but only 16 percent of 18-year-olds had. One wonders whether such efforts are in fact equipping these younger adolescents for their upcoming battles with sexual temptation or simply getting them to agree to resist a temptation they don't yet feel.

Despite their popularity, particular virginity-pledge organizations were seldom identified by name in our interviews, even by those who had taken such a pledge. One young man who does identify with a particular movement is Dalton, an 18-year-old evangelical from Texas who has just started college at a Christian university:

> Uh, I don't think it [sex] is appropriate when [a couple] is not married. Um, if you mean physically, like kissing and stuff, of course I've kissed, I mean, a couple of girls. And I've kissed my girlfriend and stuff like that. Um, we never got really physical and stuff, just because that's something that we had pledged not to do. [*Where'd you, how did you come to decide these things?*] Um, she was the one that, and I'm glad she brought it up 'cause I didn't want to bring it up . . . but she was the one that brought it up and said, "How about we pledge to do this?" And I was like, "Wow, that's great with me." So that's how we came to that decision.

When asked about how he could tell if potential romantic interests were virgins (and thus ideal for him), Dalton responds:

> They had their True Love Waits rings. Of course I didn't know for sure, but I mean I could pretty much tell just by the way that they acted and stuff. [*True love what?*] Like some kids will get True Love Waits rings and um, those rings are like, it was a big Southern Baptist push like way, about four years ago, and they still do it now. Like you get a ring when you turn like 15 or something like that and you pledge to save yourself for your marriage and stuff. [*Did you do that?*] Did I do that? Yeah. I did it.

Unfortunately for Dalton, he once accidentally (temporarily) misplaced his ring, making for an interesting interaction with his very conservative parents. When I spoke with him two years later, however, the ring was still on his finger.

Of course not all virgins have maintained their virginity *because* of the pledge, and such pledges were infrequently mentioned in our interviews. Indeed, the average teenager who steers clear of sexual intercourse during the high school years does so without reference to the abstinence pledge movement. Some religious traditions have their own similar concepts, such as the Mormons' emphasis on age "goals" that correspond with common age-at-marriage patterns. Many young people do not take a formal, public pledge but nevertheless privately pledge or promise to themselves that they will wait until they are married before having sex. One study of California adolescents estimated that just under half of its sample of 870 youth made such a private pledge (Bersamin et al. 2005). Less than a quarter of such private pledgers had also made a more formal, public pledge.

Table 4.2 displays the percentage of Add Health respondents who have taken a pledge to remain abstinent from sex until marriage, split by religious categories. These percentages are also divided into three types: pledged at Wave I, pledged at Wave II, and pledged at both waves. The phenomenon is understandably most popular among evangelical Protestants and Mormons, although only a maximum of one in four adolescents reports making such a promise at any one wave, and no more than one in seven are consistent about it. Very few Jewish and nonreligious youths have taken such a pledge, and only 8–12 percent of youths in other Christian traditions have ever done so. Pledging corresponds not only with affiliation but also with religiosity. Although the likelihood of pledging abstinence appears to rise in linear fashion with church attendance and religious salience, the real action remains at the top: the most religious teens are more than twice as likely to have promised abstinence when compared with teens in the next most religious category. And they are four to six times more likely than the least religious adolescents to have pledged. The gap among consistent pledgers is even wider. More rigorous statistical analyses (in Table A4.1) of pledging abstinence suggest that the evangelical Protestant and Mormon effects are not ephemeral. Even

Table 4.2 Pledged Abstinence from Sex until Marriage at Waves I and II and Both (in Percentages), by Religious Variables

	Wave I	*Wave II*	*Both waves*
Religious Tradition			
Evangelical Protestant	22.3	22.9	14.0
Mainline Protestant	12.4	11.9	5.9
Black Protestant	12.4	10.5	4.2
Catholic	10.7	8.3	3.3
Mormon (LDS)	27.1	25.5	12.3
Jewish	2.4	1.8	<1.0
Other religion	13.9	14.1	6.6
No religion	6.1	3.4	1.2
Church Attendance			
Weekly	21.6	22.5	12.6
Once a month but less than weekly	9.9	8.7	3.9
Less than once a month	8.1	4.7	2.1
Never	6.3	3.7	1.3
Importance of Religion			
Very important	21.5	21.4	11.8
Fairly important	8.9	7.7	3.4
Fairly unimportant	4.0	4.7	1.8
Not important at all	5.9	3.7	<1.0
"Born again"	24.9	24.3	14.6
Not "born again"	9.0	7.6	3.0

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health

after numerous controls, adolescents from these two traditions are still more likely to have pledged abstinence than mainline Protestants, black Protestants, Catholics, or Jews. Youth who attend religious services more frequently and who think that religion is important are also each more likely to have pledged at Wave I. These particular findings are even stronger when we consider consistent pledging across waves (not shown). Other notable associations with pledging include greater family satisfaction, less individual autonomy, and a strategic orientation. The pledge is also more popular with girls than boys.

The pledge is not always so memorable, however. Pledge "retraction" is common in the Add Health data: over 50 percent of respondents who said at Wave I that they had taken such a pledge denied it at Wave II (Rosenbaum 2006). Retractors are more likely to be African American, either not a "born

again" Christian or no longer one, or newly sexually active. The popularity of the pledge among evangelical youth should not surprise, since they are the target market of most of the movement organizations, and they are also less likely to retract.

Despite its popularity, the pledge movement reaches far fewer teenagers than abstinence-based sex education in schools, which is currently favored by the George W. Bush administration. Unlike pledge organizations, however, abstinence education programs that receive federal funds under Title V of the Social Security Act are *not* legally allowed to discuss religious perspectives. Taking the morality out of sexual abstinence advocacy seems crippling, however, especially since popular American cultural and media institutions are hardly pro-abstinence. One wonders how effective abstinence-based education can possibly be when stripped of all theological and moral motivation and left to compete in the adolescent marketplace of ideas. Somehow, I suspect, MTV, BET, and VH-1 garner a wider and more attentive audience.

In Love with an Ideal?

To many abstaining adolescents, marriage is the "golden light at the end of the perilous tunnel of dating" (Ali and Scelfo 2002: 61). Pledgers are encouraged to speak of giving their future spouse the ultimate wedding present—their virginity (Carpenter 2005b; White 2004). The right person, after all, is "worth waiting for." Talk of "ultimate loves" and "soulmates" abounds. This begs the question: are abstinence pledgers and devoutly religious adolescents blowing marital sexuality out of proportion, investing the wedding night with far more significance and anticipation than it can bear? While the evidence for it would be difficult to accurately amass, some of the adolescents with whom we spoke seem to do this. Jana, a 17-year-old evangelical Protestant from North Carolina, articulates such hopes:

> My belief is that you're supposed to wait until you get married, because that just makes it more special, you know. I mean your honeymoon will be an experience you'll always remember that way, and it's just you know, the ultimate commitment to somebody.

Kathleen, a 17-year-old mainline Protestant from California, holds high expectations for both marriage and her eventual husband, and she puts them bluntly:

> Sometimes I've thought maybe if I had sex with someone and I felt loved, then things would change. But then I thought no, you know what, that's kind

> of, no, I'd ruin my life, 'cause I'm waiting for my husband. If he's not a virgin, I'm going to be really pissed. Going to be really mad, you know. But it's OK, if I love him, I'm still going to marry him anyway.

While such talk may please some parents and leaders of the abstinence pledge movement, other Christians are not so sure. Lauren Winner (2005: 95), herself an advocate of chastity, complains about such idealism: "we spend years guarding our virginity, but find, upon getting married, that we cannot just flip a switch." When, in marriage, sex is finally OK, even encouraged, many young women "are stuck with years of work (and sometimes therapy) to unlearn" the habits of sexual denial (2005: 95). Young people trained to put up barriers against sex often cannot deconstruct them rapidly upon marrying (Rose 2005). What was very wrong a day before is not easily understood to be very right a day later. Just how common this scenario is remains unknown, though I suspect it is more typical than many think.[2]

Abstinence pledgers are not the only sexual and romantic idealists. Many adolescents—especially girls—are immersed in a culture of romance, regardless of their religiosity or their attitudes toward sex. Karin Martin (2002: 144) refers to stories of "ideal love," which "are not stories of passion and sexuality but are stories of romance and what sociologist Arlie Hochschild calls magnified moments." She argues that first dates, first meetings, first sexual experiences, and even break-ups serve for many adolescent girls as magnified moments of such idealistic love. Such idealism need not end with a girl's first sexual experience, either. Amanda, a 15-year-old mainline Protestant from Tennessee, remarks about the ex-boyfriend to whom she lost her virginity: "It was my first love and I'll love him forever for it." It is perhaps not accidental that all of the more articulate interviewees about the pledge and sexual idealism are girls. Boys, Martin (2002) writes, rarely use the word *love* in discussing their sentiments within romantic relationships. They also tend to anticipate sexual pleasure more than girls and are in turn less likely to value abstinence (Martin 2002).

Other girls criticize abstaining adolescents for just such idealism. Diane, a 17-year-old Jewish girl from Illinois, actually thinks that waiting until marriage is a good idea, but she doesn't think it's practical to expect: "It is a good idea, but it's very idealistic. . . . I think that some of the people that say they're going to wait and have signed pledges are kidding themselves and are trying to make their parents feel better." Leah, a 15-year-old Jewish girl from Maryland, counts a variety of religious types among her wide circle of friends, including two devout Christians. When asked whether she thinks religious faith shapes her friends' relationships with the opposite sex, Leah speaks disparagingly of the abstinence ideal:

> Definitely. Like those [Christian] girls I was talking about. They will only date if they think they can marry the person. They . . . believe in abstinence before marriage. . . . I know some of my Catholic friends . . . they don't believe in birth control. Um, some won't date unless they think—like the girl I was talking about who is just so naïve and like, she's like, "everything's so perfect," and, like, can't do anything bad—wants to date somebody who's perfect. She won't kiss. She doesn't want to kiss anyone before she gets married because it has to be perfect, like [laughs] . . . like marriage is . . . the only perfect, holy thing you can share . . . with each other. And it's mostly a religious thing.

Carol, a 17-year-old nonreligious girl from Florida, wonders aloud about why some people make such a big deal out of sex:

> I don't see why sex is such a sacred thing to so many people. Um, I guess to some people sex is a way of expressing love. But to me it's not. It's just not. . . . It's just pleasure, it's physical pleasure and that's what it is. Yes, you can express that you love someone through having sex with them, but just because you're having sex doesn't necessarily mean that you love the person.

She guesstimates that she's had 10 or 11 sexual partners.

Criticism of the pledge even comes from within evangelicals' own ranks. Kara, a 17-year-old evangelical Protestant from Texas, knows the lingo and is aware of a key organization promoting the pledge. She's not yet had sexual intercourse but has given oral sex to a previous boyfriend, which she regrets. The experience led her to reevaluate her expectations of romantic relationships, and she's now dating someone who, though previously "promiscuous" (in her own words), is no longer sexually active. Whether her remarks about pledging would have been different had she been dating someone with a less checkered sexual past, we cannot know. But her choice of words is revealing: she describes her religious community in oppositional terms as "they" instead of as "we." When asked about her religion's teachings on sex, she responds:

> Um, they practiced something called True Love Waits. I wasn't really involved with it at the time. But that's where you take a vow to God that you will wait 'til marriage and whatnot. They were really based on waiting 'til marriage. [*OK. And, um, how did you feel about it?*] I agreed with it, if that was like the right thing for you, but I didn't think that you'd have to be that strict with it. I mean, yes, it has to be with as few people as possible, but you don't have to wait until you're tied into somebody for the rest of your life. I mean, it's still something that you know, every person's different about it and sometimes it's better to experience different ways and experiences.

Nevertheless, idealism combined with a supportive and watchful moral community can give unusual sticking power to an abstinence commitment. Katie, a 17-year-old evangelical (and self-reported virgin) from Indiana, thinks premarital sex is "wrong, wrong. Save it for marriage. You have your whole life." An attractive young woman, Katie does not lack potential suitors, at least one of whom attempted to take advantage of her. No way:

> [I]n February, I was dating this guy, Matt, um, and it was like Valentine's Day, and he like wanted to take me out. And at first I knew he was like a forceful guy 'cause I'd gone on a date with him before. But he was, like, at church and stuff. He played it out so well in front of my parents and he told them all this stuff. He just seemed like such a great guy. And then, um, took me out and then, like, you know, pretty much just . . . yeah . . . but nothing went too far 'cause I pulled out my cell phone and had the number ready. I was like, "Take me home now," but it was terrible. So, I guess that's why I've just had the whole thing about saving myself and I've been really sketchy, you know, with guys. I want to date them first, 'cause I want to be able to trust them. [*Yeah, so in that last situation, you were able to just call your parents and they came and got you?*] Oh no, he took me home. I had 911 in there. [*Oh wow.*] I was like, "don't even play with me" 'cause if I told my parents, they would, they would kill him. . . . 'Cause he knew being in our church . . . people would find out. And you know, yeah, he came to his senses.

Is the Abstinence Pledge Movement Effective?

Promising to avoid sexual intercourse until marriage is of no interest to some adolescents, an uphill struggle for some, and seemingly easy for others. Some pledge because it seems like a good strategy to help avoid pregnancy, STDs, guilt, or a bad reputation. Others feel destined to fail their own ideals without it. Still others pledge because it is a popular thing to do in their church or school, or because their parents expect them to. But do such pledges really work? Is promising virginity to one's family and peers enough to withstand the sexual assault on the senses so commonly associated with the adolescent years?

The Limits of Pledge Effectiveness

The answer to this question depends on how one defines a "successful" movement. If success is defined here as a *drastic* difference in the percentage of pledgers and nonpledgers who remain virgins until marriage, then the answer

is no. Hannah Brückner and Peter Bearman's (2005) recent evaluation of Add Health's Wave III data, which by now contain a significant number of married young adults, finds that 99 percent of nonvirgins who had *not* pledged at any wave had lost their virginity before their weddings. Among nonvirgins who *had* pledged to abstain from sex until marriage, 88 percent had broken their pledges.[3] Eighty-eight percent is of course lower than 99 percent, but I suspect that even abstinence-movement proponents are not encouraged by these results. (In other words, sex before marriage is *very* common in American society presently.)[4] Pledge breakers tend not to break their pledge with their future spouse, either. Among those who had ever pledged, were married by Wave III of the survey, and had had premarital sex, 7 in 10 reported having had more than one sex partner.[5] On the other hand, even pledge breakers have *far fewer* sexual partners on average than nonpledgers.

However, we cannot conclude from these numbers (at least not yet) that 88 percent of all pledgers break their pledge. The 88 percent figure does not include respondents who have not had sex yet. About 44 percent of unmarried respondents who claim (at some wave) to have pledged abstinence were still virgins at Wave III. Additionally, the sexual behavior of inconsistent pledgers (or retractors) is distinct from both nonpledgers and consistent pledgers (Brückner and Bearman 2005). Indeed, the outlook improves for abstinence proponents when we examine only those pledgers who have already married, not just those who have had sex. In the sample of *married* young adults, 88 percent of nonpledgers and 68 percent of inconsistent pledgers engaged in vaginal intercourse before marriage, but only 56 percent of consistent pledgers did so. When we consider only *unmarried* respondents, 88 percent of nonpledgers, 77 percent of inconsistent pledgers, and 54 percent of consistent pledgers are sexually experienced. Thus, a significant minority of young adult pledgers have not yet had sex. Since they're not married, however, there is no way to document their complete success in abstinence until marriage, only their present state. These (albeit confusing) numbers may not be enough to thrill pledge advocates, but they do suggest that the pledge indeed reduces the occurrence of sexual relationships prior to marriage.

Ironically, the popularity of abstinence pledging within a school actually diminishes the pledge's effectiveness (Bearman and Brückner 2001). Abstinence pledges are most effective in delaying first sex when a critical mass—neither too few nor too many—of schoolmates has also made such a promise (Bearman and Brückner 2001). They contend that the pledge works by embedding adolescents into a minority, "self-conscious" community that gains strength from identifying itself as "embattled." In schools where the pledge becomes too common, the embattled sentiment is lost, and the pledge is

ineffective in stemming first sex. This unique scenario no doubt makes for confusing policy (Winner 2005).

Avoiding vaginal intercourse does not mean, of course, that "successful" pledgers refrain from *all* sexual behavior. One in three adolescents who report being virgins have had genital contact with a partner in the past year (Bearman, Moody, and Stovel 2004). Thirteen percent of consistent pledgers reported oral sex but not intercourse, compared with only 2 percent of nonpledgers and 5 percent of inconsistent pledgers. One particular finding noted by Brückner and Bearman (2005) was a media hit, despite the fact that the authors—for good reason—originally made no particular note of it. In March 2005, CNN, radio talk shows, and a variety of other news media outlets picked up on their ironic finding that abstinence pledgers appear *more* likely to have anal sex than do nonpledgers. However, the statistically significant difference is hardly *substantively* significant. And it only applies to males; too few adolescent girls in the Add Health study reported ever having had anal sex to even generate meaningful estimates about them. Using its survey questions about anal sex (which some adolescents may have difficulty defining), they find that 1.2 percent of virginity pledgers report engaging in anal sex but not vaginal intercourse, compared with 0.7 percent of nonpledgers. Although the media damage is done, I would hesitate to draw any substantive conclusions about pledging and the practice of anal sex as a substitution for intercourse.[6] Anal sex is far from normative as a substitute for intercourse. It is *very* unusual. Finally, young adult pledgers' STD rates are not distinguishable from nonpledgers' rates, suggesting that the former may be more likely to engage in unprotected sex than the latter.

Successes of the Pledge Movement

On the other hand, if pledging effectiveness were defined more widely as a significant impact on a *variety* of sexual practices and outcomes—such as an increased average age at first sex—then the answer is yes, the movement has been a resounding success. The study authors (Bearman and Brückner 2004; Brückner and Bearman 2005) note this and other conclusions in their summary of the state of knowledge about pledging:

1. Pledgers lose their virginity later than nonpledgers.
2. Pledgers have fewer sexual partners than nonpledgers.
3. Pledgers' partners are less likely to cheat than nonpledgers' partners.
4. Pledgers are more likely to abstain from sex until marriage.

So, while a majority of abstinence pledgers do not wait until marriage to have sex, far more pledgers than nonpledgers do. And despite the fact that many social scientists tend to frown on "early" marriage, pledgers have a penchant for getting married earlier than nonpledgers. This, combined with an average later date of first sex, tends to pay considerable dividends in terms of diminished initial and lifetime risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease. Sexual networks are exponential, since a pair of people engaging in sexual relations are essentially "exposing" themselves to every person the partners have ever had sex with. Thus if before marrying an abstinence pledger has had fewer sexual partners than a nonpledger, and his/her spouse also has had fewer partners, then their STD transmission risk is diminished, despite the appearance of no statistical difference in STD status during young adulthood.

Whether the glass is half-empty or half-full depends, of course, on what various interest groups define as "success." Public health officials would be taken aback by pledgers' common failure to consistently use contraception when they do have sex, while the pledge movement no doubt wishes their overall pledging success rates were higher. But both can find reasons to cheer as well as challenges still to be addressed.

Religion and the Pledge

For all their helpful research, Bearman and Brückner are infrequently concerned about understanding religious influences on pledging behavior and sexual decision making. Still, they (2001) note that religiosity is associated with taking the abstinence pledge and with delayed first sex for white, Hispanic, and Asian adolescents. Table 4.3 displays the percentage of Add Health respondents who were virgins at Wave I but nonvirgins at Wave II, split by both religiosity and Wave I pledging status. Both church attendance and importance of religion predict first sex *regardless of pledging status*. However, each of these is *more* effective in the presence of the pledge than apart from it. The magnitude is small but stable: 13 percent of pledgers who attend church weekly had sex between study waves, compared to 18 percent of nonpledgers who are regular attenders. The difference is comparable for the religious salience measure.

While I can only evaluate the effect of the public abstinence pledge that is associated with the broader movement, there is evidence emerging that suggests that a *private* pledge or promise made to oneself is working at least as well, and perhaps better, than the public pledge. In the study of California adolescents I noted earlier, private pledging reduced the likelihood that teenagers will engage in intercourse and oral sex (Bersamin et al. 2005). A formal

Table 4.3 Adolescents Who Reported First Sex at Wave II (in Percentages), Split by Wave I Pledging Status, Wave I Virgins Only

	Experienced First Sex	
	Pledged at Wave I	*Did not pledge at Wave I*
Church Attendance		
Weekly or more	12.6	17.7
Less than weekly	16.5	21.7
Less than once a month	17.3	24.1
Never	21.2	26.1
Importance of Religion		
Very important	12.7	18.5
Fairly important	17.8	21.7
Fairly unimportant	21.9	23.3
Not important at all	22.6	28.2

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health

public pledge made little difference by comparison. The authors speculate that while formal pledges may introduce external social control from peers or adults, they may fail if they are simply a response to social pressure to make such a commitment. A private pledge, on the other hand, is thought to capture more intrinsic motivation, resolve that comes from within rather than from outside.

Secondary Abstinence

The pledge movement is quick to remind both its fans and its critics that it is about *abstinence* and not about virginity per se, since a significant number of youths may have already lost their virginity before deciding that abstaining from sex until marriage is a good idea. Such youths are known as "secondary" abstainers, for whom the pledge is meant to help absolve them of guilt and provide them with a sense of sexual "restoration" in a spiritual and perhaps psychological sense. Just as I noted earlier the phenomenon of pledge retraction, there is also the phenomenon of sex retraction. Youth who said at Wave I that they were not virgins, then reported at Wave II that they are—among other things—are more likely to be recently identified "born again" Christians and those who had newly pledged abstinence (Rosenbaum 2006). Such adolescents may think of themselves as "secondary" virgins. How and why? Janet Rosenbaum (2006) offers a few plausible reasons: first, people have a tendency

to want to reconcile their memories with their present beliefs. In other words, many people—adults and adolescents alike—have a tendency to reframe their past in such a way that their present makes more sense. Whether such respondents are intentionally trying to deceive the survey administrator, or whether they are in fact deceiving themselves and reporting what they honestly think is true is not clear. Second, some respondents may view their previous sexual activity as somehow experimental and for that reason think that it doesn't count. In fact, she notes, those who recant their reports of sexual behavior had fewer partners at Wave I. The phenomenon may thus be most popular with youth who have only experienced sexual intercourse once.

Another trend toward secondary abstinence may be in the works, too, one that has less to do with religious motivation and more to do with romanticized ideals. In a 2002 *New York Times* article, Elizabeth Hayt noted the popularity of short periods of sexual abstinence prior to marriage by otherwise sexually active white, southern young women (whose religiosity is unclear). Although she states that this is "increasingly the norm for many brides-to-be across the South," there is presently no social science data to either confirm or reject her interesting claim. Hayt suggests that the practice has gained momentum since the 1990s, fueled by the abstinence movements in sex education and evangelical churches (Aug. 4, 2002, sec. 9). Even the head of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary recognizes it as largely "a southern thing." It's also a female thing, aimed (apparently) in part at reducing the higher-than-average level of guilt that southern women experience about sex. No doubt it is an attempt to recover sexual idealism and make the wedding night and honeymoon feel fresh and exciting. Hayt quotes one 38-year-old who abstained for a month before her wedding: "the holding out makes you feel like you've been a good girl."

Getting Motivated for Sex

To be sure, individuals' sexual choices are channeled by social networks and shaped by organizations and cultures, but in the end it is attitudes that shape motivations, and motivations that shape intentions and actions (Ellingson 2004; Gillmore et al. 2002). The Add Health study asked adolescents a series of questions about possible motivations to engage in or to avoid sex (see Table 4.4). Since adolescents who have already had sexual intercourse would very likely display different attitudes or motivations about sex, I restrict my analyses here to youth who reported being virgins at Wave I. What is immediately striking is the consistent difference between black Protestant adolescents and

Table 4.4 Motivations to Have or Avoid Sex (in Percentages), by Religious Variables, Wave I Virgins Only

	Friends would respect you more	*Partner would lose respect for you*	*After sex, you would feel guilty*	*If you had sex, it would upset your mother*	*Sex would give you much pleasure*	*Having sex would make you attractive*	*Pregnancy would embarrass you*
Religious Tradition							
Evangelical Protestant	8.3	33.4	65.8	88.8	33.1	8.9	77.2
Mainline Protestant	9.6	20.3	51.6	83.3	36.1	6.6	79.9
Black Protestant	14.7	22.5	50.5	71.9	33.1	11.8	62.4
Catholic	11.2	21.0	46.9	81.0	40.6	8.5	74.1
Mormon (LDS)	2.2	31.6	77.1	96.4	42.8	6.1	82.0
Jewish	5.5	9.0	44.6	79.0	56.4	6.3	93.7
Other religion	8.5	29.9	57.3	84.5	39.3	6.3	80.2
No religion	10.5	15.2	32.8	67.9	45.5	8.5	66.0
Church Attendance							
Weekly	8.9	31.6	65.9	89.9	35.9	6.5	80.7
Once a month but less than weekly	11.8	20.7	48.1	80.2	37.9	10.5	74.9
Less than once a month	10.1	16.0	40.5	75.8	43.3	7.7	72.7
Never	10.2	15.8	35.4	70.3	39.6	9.5	67.7

Importance of Religion							
Very important	9.4	32.5	64.7	87.3	35.9	8.6	78.5
Fairly important	10.8	17.6	46.2	80.6	37.1	7.8	74.3
Fairly unimportant	8.8	15.5	34.0	79.6	45.1	6.5	77.6
Not important at all	9.9	14.3	34.3	67.1	46.5	7.8	68.0
"Born again"	9.9	34.6	67.8	88.5	32.5	7.8	79.2
Not "born again"	9.9	19.3	45.4	78.8	40.5	8.3	73.6

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health

Note: Calculated as the percentage that "agrees" or "strongly agrees" with the statements.

most other religious groups in at least four types of sexual motivation. Black Protestant adolescent virgins are the most likely to say that their friends would respect them more if they had sex, least likely to say that their having sex would upset their mother (were she to find out), most likely to say that having sex would make them more attractive, and least likely to say that a premarital pregnancy would embarrass them.

Not all sexual motivations differ between races. Both evangelical and black Protestant youth are less likely to say that having sex would give them much pleasure. Evangelicals are most likely to say that having sex would lead to losing the respect of their partner and very likely to anticipate considerable sexual guilt *and* their mother's wrath (second only in each category to Mormons). Jewish adolescents stand out as well. They are least likely to say that having sex would lead the partner to lose respect for them, more likely than nonreligious youth to anticipate sexual guilt, most likely to say that sex would be pleasurable, and most likely to say that pregnancy would be an embarrassment. Religious tradition, perhaps together with race, clearly has something to do with sexual motivations.

Yet, as with other outcomes, the results suggest that religiosity matters more for sexual motivations than does religious tradition. Notice the linear relationship between anticipated sexual pleasure and declining religious salience. Simply put, the more devout an adolescent virgin, the less likely he/she is to anticipate sex as pleasurable. This seems to me a remarkable cultural variation in the emotional and psychological expectations about the physical experience of sex. But if one motivation could be characterized as *most* related to religiosity, it is anticipated guilt. There is a *30 percentage point gap* in anticipated guilt between youths exhibiting the highest and lowest levels of either form of religiosity. However, some may see the glass as half-empty: fully one-third of devoutly religious American adolescents (who are presently virgins) don't think that having sex would make them feel guilty.[7]

While there are linear associations between religiosity and a number of the motivations, no linear logic is apparent between it and friends' respect and sex making one more attractive. Note also the bipolar results about the lost respect of a sexual partner: nearly one in three of the most devout youth anticipate that their sexual partner would definitely lose respect for them were they to have sex. Youth of all other levels of religiosity cluster around 15–20 percent on that question.

Most of the associations between religiosity and sexual motivations hold up even after accounting for demographic controls, family satisfaction, personal autonomy, strategic orientation, previous sexual experience, and dating habits (see Table A4.2). Church attendance and/or religious salience remain *independently* associated with anticipated guilt, lost respect of a sexual partner,

upsetting one's mother, and pregnancy embarrassment. Identifying oneself as a "born again" Christian is also—net of religiosity and other controls—associated with greater guilt, loss of respect from one's sexual partner and friends, and a more emotionally upset mother. It is safe to say, then, that most of the sexual motivations evaluated here have stable statistical associations with religiosity.

While the NSYR interviews did not directly inquire about sexual motivations, the topic of guilt emerged with some regularity, largely reinforcing the regression results. For Justin, the 17-year-old Roman Catholic from Rhode Island featured in chapter 1, guilt is not a factor that motivates him to avoid sex:

> I mean, ah, I don't know [what motivates teenagers to have sex]. Guys kind of like, you know, a feeling of . . . achievement. And then the girls, I don't know what motivates girls to have sex. [*So for guys it's achievement?*] Yeah, kind of. I mean . . . it's all positives for guys if you're gonna have sex. There's nothing negative.

Guilt is strongly associated with gender. In the regression models (Table A4.2), adolescent girls' odds of feeling sex-related guilt are 92 percent higher than boys. Melissa, a 15-year-old Roman Catholic from Florida, experienced palpable guilt after performing oral sex. Yet in order to minimize the guilt, she confided about the experience only to "supportive" friends:

> [*OK, how do you feel about it?*] Um, to myself, like guilty. Because, but like, like some of my friends I told, like, that's nothing to them, so. Um, I feel bad, but if I told some friends I know I'd feel worse. But like, I told certain friends that won't, that just think it's OK, I guess to make myself feel better because they've done a lot more, so.

The Final Barrier: Emotional Readiness

As one scholar of adolescent sexuality wisely points out, "Teens do not add up their demographic variables to see if they should have sex. They have sex in the context of their lives and relationships" (Martin 2002: 149). So during our interviews, the research team spent considerable time talking about the context and circumstances in which sex could be considered acceptable or unacceptable. A majority of adolescents revealed their criteria to us, while a minority held that it was never appropriate for teenagers to be having sex. Neither

gender nor race nor socioeconomic status distinguishes these two groups, but religion does. Less religious youth are far more likely to offer scenarios in which sex between consenting adolescents is fine. Many adolescents almost entirely lack an articulated, discernible sexual ethic, save for widespread disapproval of casual (or transactional) sex and one-night stands, especially among girls (Risman and Schwartz 2002). Nonreligious youth, together with a significant majority of black Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Roman Catholic youth (and a minority of evangelicals), largely draw upon a language devoid of "traditional" sexual morality as they evaluate the appropriateness of sexual behavior. In their own words:

- "If they want to do it, then it's all right. Just be protected. Don't make stupid choices like not using a condom" (black Protestant, regular attender, age 15).
- "You just should feel that you're mature enough, I guess. . . . I don't know" (Jewish, nonattender, age 17).
- "I guess if they're mentally prepared and aware and they understand what can happen, that's really the main thing. I mean if you want to do it, go for it. Just make sure you're safe about it and you understand" (nonreligious, age 17).
- "Whenever they feel like they're ready" (evangelical Protestant, regular attender, age 16).
- "I guess you should probably know the person's name, you should probably know the person, maybe, spend some time with them before you ever get to that point" (black Protestant, somewhat religious, age 17).
- "I think it's important that they know each other at least" (nonreligious, age 18).

Obviously, we should expect adolescents who have already experienced sexual intercourse to articulate a more tolerant sexual ethic. However, such opinions are not only held by adolescents who have already had sex. They are also the opinions of many who are still virgins:

- "If you want to and you really feel like that for a person, you want to take it to that next level. Then, like, go ahead and do it" (Roman Catholic, regular attender, age 15).
- "If they really like each other, they should" (Roman Catholic, nonattender, age 14).
- "I think it's OK just as long as you're safe about it" (Roman Catholic, regular attender, age 16).

- "I think that it's really who you are and what you're ready for. I think if you're not ready and you say no, it shouldn't happen to you. But other than that, I think it's basically all about the individual" (Jewish, sporadic attender, age 14).
- "I think it's OK if you both want to do it and nobody's feeling pressured [into] doing anything that inside they don't want to do" (mainline Protestant, nonattender, age 14).

Even age does not distinguish their answers. For most adolescents, age is not an important criterion for sexual preparedness. To be sure, most of the 13- and 14-year-olds with whom we spoke are not sexually active and did not anticipate becoming so anytime soon. Yet many of them hesitate to pass judgment on peers who are having sex. The judge-not norm tends to trump any misgivings. Age only contributes to their level of shock, not to disappointment or anger. Beth, a 14-year-old agnostic who says that sex is "not even on my radar screen," puts it this way:

> I mean if one of my friends came up to me and said, "Hey guess what, I had sex last night," I'd be like, "What?" You know, it's not that I wouldn't accept it. I think that I would just be a little surprised.

Christy, an 18-year-old Catholic from upstate New York who attends mass sporadically and has never had sex, told us that one of her friends recently shared with her that she had had sex. Clearly shocked, Christy tries hard *not* to be disappointed in her friend:

> I don't know [if] it scared me, but I just felt like I couldn't believe that she would do that. When I talked to her, I didn't say that. I was just like, "oh, OK." I was just [saying to myself] "hold it in" and things like that. But it just seems like, like protection isn't 100 percent effective, you know. And it just seems so dangerous to do that. I just don't see the point about doing it before marriage. It's just like you're totally one with the person, you know, and I just don't see that I would want to be, like, stressed out and not sure I would want to make that kind of choice. I would rather be just, like, sure. Like, confident in my choice. But, um, she made that decision, so. And she's OK. She's made that decision.

In a nutshell, the norm appears to be "emotional readiness," a catchphrase or action script with which many adolescents identify. A lot of respondents think that waiting until marriage is probably a good idea, but it's not necessary and probably not realistic. So far as I can tell, emotional readiness means that it's fine for you to have sex if (a) you're ready, (b) that's what you

want to do, (c) you're not being pressured, and to a lesser extent, (d) as long as you're being "safe" (practicing contraception and protection from STDs). Others add that "it's more than a feeling," that in order to be emotionally ready, "you should realize what you're getting into" and be "old enough to handle the complex emotions of sex." Furthermore, you shouldn't have intercourse with just anyone; it should be a special thing. For many girls in particular, love—however they define it—increasingly justifies the pursuit of a sexual relationship (Risman and Schwartz 2002).

What Does "Emotional Readiness" Mean?

Ironically, "being emotionally ready" is a familiar and comfortable phrase to many adolescents, but as a norm it largely lacks standardized content and it risks being a platitude. Many definitions of it are hopelessly confusing. Dawn, an 18-year-old practicing Catholic from New York, offers an admirable effort but a convoluted account of the new standard:

> I think that, I mean, I think it's OK. But I mean, I think for me, at least I don't think that sex, I just, I can't, because that's just my own personal opinion. But I mean, I think it's OK just as long as you're safe about it. If you're safe about, I mean, then, you know, just don't be, like, totally reckless with it. 'Cause some, you know, you can get hurt. You can, you know, get yourself in trouble and get into all kinds of problems. Um, so I think it's, you know, I think it's OK, though. You know people, I mean, I could think of so many people that do it, but just, you know, it's totally natural. Um, I think it's, but you know if it, you have to do it according to how you feel. I mean, too, if you really want to, I mean that's fine, you know?

Dawn was far from alone in her inarticulateness. Terrence, a 16-year-old Catholic from Connecticut (who does not actively attend mass), suggests that emotional readiness is unfortunately defined *in hindsight*. If this is true, being emotionally ready would be very difficult for adolescents to use as a yardstick to gauge their own sexual preparedness:

> [I]f you're not ready, and you do it, you know, you might, you might feel disgusted with yourself or you might regret it. Or you might just look at it, you might, like, just, just be focused on it. Like, "why did I do this, why?" They might take it negatively. I, I don't know. [*Is there, like, when is that, or, how would someone know that they were ready?*] There's not really a definite way of knowing. Just have to, when you, when you think that you're ready and you try it, then you know. For sure afterwards.

Cindy is 16 years old, from Indiana, and practices Wicca. She echoes the after-the-fact documentation of emotional readiness:

> If you, like, after you do it, you call up your friend and be, like, "Oh no, I just had sex," then you're not ready for it, you know. But if you're, like, if you did it and you're like, "Wow, that was nice," and you just, like, accept that you did, then it's different. Because then you're not doing it because you want other people to know that you did. You're doing it because you wanted to and you thought it was appropriate for you and your boyfriend to take the next step in that relationship.

Other adolescents disparage talk about emotional readiness. Most (but not all) are very religious or belong to conservative religious traditions. In their own words:

- "I don't think you can ever be emotionally ready as a teenager for anything" (Jehovah's Witness, regular attender, age 16).
- "Whoever came up with that 'ready' stuff was dumb" (evangelical Protestant, regular attender, age 16).
- "I don't think that anybody my age is ready to have sex" (Jewish nonattender, age 17).
- "Most of us have no idea what we're ready for. So it's kind of like, why press your luck?" (evangelical Protestant, regular attender, age 15).
- "If you look at sex as something that's just [only] supposed to be fun and pleasurable, then you're not ready for it, because it's supposed to be so much more than that" (evangelical Protestant, regular attender, age 17).

The ample duration of a romantic relationship is another factor in gauging sexual preparedness. Those respondents who do *not* advocate simple sexual abstinence vary in the length of time that they suggest is sufficient before an exclusive romantic relationship can add a sexual dimension. Most answers range from three to eight months. Very few suggest longer than a year. Theresa, a 16-year-old, unaffiliated, nonreligious girl from Nebraska, thinks seven months is admirable:

> My one friend Terra, her boyfriend, Philip, he's a really shy guy and he didn't even want to have sex until she was ready. And he said that if she didn't want to do it all they didn't have to. And they've been going out for, like, eight months now and they didn't have sex until, like, a month ago. And I just think that if a guy is willing to wait that long without any pressure, then I think he really cares about you.

A year is clearly longer than necessary to the majority of adolescents for whom sexual activity is a live option.

Remarkably, comparatively few adolescents cite a readiness to (a) raise children or (b) make a long-term relationship commitment as key criteria of the emotional readiness for sex. Arguably, if we had fielded this questionnaire to a random sample of adolescents in 1980, these two responses would have been more popular. Today, they are uncommon, mostly limited to the very religious, like Cheryl (a 16-year-old Mormon from Utah): "Being intimate with someone, I think it's very, um, like, sacred, you know. It should be shared with someone that you love and you're willing to spend, like, the rest of your life with."

The New Rules of Sexual Engagement

In an age when effective contraception can all but mitigate the threat of pregnancy or STDs, what rationale for abstinence is left among those who carry no sense of the sacredness, or even the seriousness, of sex? Sexual ethics appear to be largely self-focused in their present constitution, and they offer little sense of what might be right or good for a *pair* of people, or for the other partner. Sexual morality is seldom categorical. It is fluid in its boundaries and subject to considerable gray areas and alteration on-the-fly. "I think it's basically all about the individual," summarized one adolescent with whom we spoke. If only it were.

One student of adolescence concludes that "there are no longer any rules regarding sexuality in mainstream society, especially for adolescents" (Clark 2004: 127). This, however, is far from true. The rules might look different or sound strange, but they are there. No doubt, contemporary sexual morality is less concerned with the right or wrong of sex or its timing. There are, however, numerous norms of appropriate sexual engagement during adolescence: you should not have sex with your friend's boy- or girlfriend, you should not have sex with "a lot" of people (it may harm your reputation), both partners should be willing, you shouldn't be too young, and—at least from most girls' perspective—you should be in love. Protection is a good idea. There is thus still plenty of sexual morality among contemporary adolescents. It's just not the type with which many adolescents' parents were once familiar and which they might still prefer.

No compelling language will make most American adults feel good about adolescent sexual behavior. The public health community emphasizes terms like protection, safety, respect, responsibility, trust, and consent. The social

service community presses youth to avoid risky behaviors that can place them in situations of heightened dependence. But ideas such as patience, commitment, and lifelong love seem out of date, hopelessly romantic, idealistic, and impractical for most. A minority, however, still claims such dying ideals. Christy is one of those minorities. Her internal conflict about the sexual choices of friends reveals a deep-seated link between sex and conceptions of the good life. While she voices her concern about the practical risks of sex, her choice of terms—using words like "scared" and "hold it in"—suggests something deeper than mere interest in a friend's future life chances. Try as she might to not judge her friends, Christy nevertheless finds it impossible to completely bury the moral aspects of sexuality and sexual practice.

The Sexual Boundaries of Devoutly Religious Youth

If sex is out of bounds for some teenagers, just how far is it OK to go? Kissing? Sexual touching?[8] Many religious adolescents inquire of their church youth group leaders about this very thing. Lauren Winner, who has emerged as one of the more popular, contemporary spokespersons among the younger generation of religious conservatives, advocates for not doing anything in private that you would be embarrassed to do in public (Winner 2005). For her, sexual decision making concerns more than just a pair of people but also their religious community and friends, who have (theoretically) invested time, energy, and hope in the bond. While purposefully avoiding categorical claims about this or that action, Winner has hit upon what a majority of religiously conservative adolescents would articulate as acceptable boundaries: everything beyond holding hands and kissing is off limits. Likened to "cheat codes" in video games, sexual touching is simply too far, akin to keeping the letter of the law, but not the spirit of it (Rosenbloom 2005).

"Probably just kissing and making out" was the line of demarcation for Rick, a 14-year-old mixed-race (white and Asian) evangelical from Maryland. Like Rick, Jeanie—a 16-year-old evangelical from California—senses the power and pull of sex. Boundaries are necessary to protect her from doing things she believes she would come to regret: "I think it's unsafe to do anything, like, past kissing, because then you want to do more." The key concern for Rick, Jeanie, and many other religiously conservative adolescents is not that kissing is wrong. To them, it's a morally neutral action. But they believe it could easily lead to other more serious and immoral actions. Although

Brandi, a 15-year-old Hispanic evangelical from Louisiana, is no longer a virgin, she told us that she feels forgiven by God and articulates a new and stricter set of criteria:

> Everything that's not kissing is sex. Like if it's, like, touching and stuff, I think that all has to, like, ends up leading to sex anyway, so I consider that part of sex. That's still something you should wait 'til marriage, 'cause, I don't know, you need to be pure for your husband and everything.

A minority of very religious youth advocate for even stricter boundaries, such as nothing beyond holding hands and "side hugs" instead of chest-to-chest hugs. This is especially the case among younger adolescents, whose rules are understandably more conservative. Darla, a 15-year-old evangelical from California who attends a very conservative church and school, is adamant:

> I don't think a boy and a girl should be touching each other at all. [*Uh-huh, not even holding hands?*] Yeah. [*OK, so there would be no physical contact at all.*] Yeah. [*Between boys and girls until marriage?*] Yeah. [*OK.*] I guess I could see people, like, holding your fiancée's hand or something . . . [or] . . . if she broke her ankle and you had to, like, carry her down the stairs or something.

Since there are essentially no official religious rules on appropriate dating behavior, such rule making is often less about religion and more about adolescents' developmental stage. Tricia, a 14-year-old evangelical from Montana, developed a set of rules based upon how she feels at her age. She acknowledges little religious clarity on the matter: "It's my opinion, that's all. I don't know anything about what the Bible says about [them]." The very religious are not the only ones who advocate conservative boundaries. Kent, a 17-year-old nominally Catholic boy from Ohio who rarely attends mass and identifies himself as fairly unreligious, nevertheless sees little value in sex at his age. A fairly strategic young man, Kent does not profess marriage as his marker of readiness, but he claims he will not likely be ready for sex until he is at least 20 years old and then only with the "right person."

Masturbation

Many religious adolescent boys—and some girls—struggle with another sexual boundary: masturbation, the most common intercourse substitute, bar none. Popular evangelical author Joshua Harris (2003) humorously notes that devout

young men often thumb through Christian books on sex solely to see what they say about this issue. Many evangelical psychologists, including James Dobson (1989) of Focus on the Family, suggest that tolerating adolescent masturbation is less harmful than its condemnation and may serve to provide an outlet for "normal" sexual energy that might otherwise be channeled toward more clearly immoral paired sexual activity.[9] Compulsive masturbation, however, should be avoided. Wheaton College psychologist and sexologist Stanton Jones reinforces Dobson's conclusion, while admitting he has long struggled with what advice to offer in this area (Jones and Jones 1993). In masturbation's place, some focus on the "redirection" of sexual energies into more "positive" outlets, like athletics.

More recently, however, a number of evangelical pastors and authors have addressed masturbation and largely conclude that it should be avoided. In this way, the absence of all conscious, "orgasmic" sexual activity becomes the unwritten norm among them. Joshua Harris and others attempt to redirect attention away from evaluating the morality of the *act* of masturbation and toward the condition of the heart, the motives that underlie the action (Arterburn, Stoeker, and Yorkey 2002; Ethridge and Arterburn 2004; Harris 2003). Here, Harris argues, is where lust, self-centeredness, and a pleasure orientation reside, which do not seek to serve God. Some hold that masturbation is no different than other types of sexual substitution. After all, it is entirely conceivable that adolescents may rationally choose to avoid paired sexual behavior but experience frequent sexual pleasure via masturbation. If I were to summarize contemporary evangelical thinking about masturbation, then, it would be:

- Orgasm is not a sin in itself.
- Masturbation to orgasm may not be sinful in itself, but lust is.
- Since lust almost always accompanies masturbation, almost all masturbation is sin.
- Repressing masturbation may be worse than tolerating it, according to some.
- Masturbation can become compulsive, which is always problematic.
- Ultimately, solo sex is not God's intention for human sexual expression.

Contemporary Catholic and conservative mainline Protestant thought about masturbation tends to avoid the evangelical sense of gravity about it, while not outright advocating for its practice (Sonnenberg 1998). In other words, they are less quick to isolate masturbation as a concern and more apt to echo Dobson's approach.

Regrettably, the NSYR did not intentionally ask our interviewees about masturbation or its morality. (It seems that we too have trouble saying the word.) It is clearly time to collect more reliable data on this subject, especially from adolescents and young adults. The famed Chicago study of human sexuality, published in 1994, notes that 29 percent of men aged 18–24 masturbate at least once a week, compared with 9 percent of 18- to 24-year-old women (Laumann et al. 1994). They also feel the most guilt: 59 percent of 18- to 24-year-old men (and 56 percent of women of the same age) feel guilty after masturbation, the highest level among all age categories. Slightly less than 20 percent of "evangelically oriented" adult men (regardless of age) masturbate weekly, down from 28 percent of mainline Protestant men, 25 percent of Catholics, and 38 percent of nonreligious men. Interestingly, there is race and ethnic variation as well: 17 percent of African-American men masturbate at least weekly, well below the 28 percent figure for whites, 31 percent for Asian men, and 24 percent for Hispanic men.

Despite having little data to go on here, the topic of masturbation nevertheless occasionally surfaced in interviews. David, a 16-year-old evangelical from Oklahoma, told me—after much reassurance of anonymity—that he struggled with masturbation. Two years earlier, he had admitted a "brief" battle with a pornography addiction. So I presumed that the penchant for pornography was back. However, he claimed that it wasn't; the "problem" was strictly about masturbation. A youth group leader from his congregation was calling him regularly to encourage him to read his Bible daily and to see how he was doing with the problem. Indeed, an emerging theme among religious youth is one of accountability groups—pairs or groups of same-sex adolescents who seek via peer pressure to hold each other accountable, which for boys often (symbolically) means saying no to pornography and masturbation. As I noted above, talk of masturbation tends to concern adolescent *male* sexuality. Much, much less has been written about masturbation among adolescent girls.[10]

Conclusions

Before I switch gears and examine real sex—not just talk of it—a summary of the key findings in this chapter would be good to have fresh in memory.

First, adolescents who say that sex should wait until marriage are usually young (ages 13–15, and prepubescent in terms of their interests and likes) or very religious (mostly evangelical, Mormon, or conservative Catholics or mainline Protestants). Most Jewish, mainline, and Catholic adolescents are

unlikely to say that they think waiting for marriage is necessary. And they will often say that if you want to do that, you should (no pressure, though). Thus, religious conservatives and the most devout adolescents tend to hold the least permissive attitudes about sex.

Second, in terms of doing what it is explicitly intended to do, the abstinence pledge doesn't work all that well. Most marrying young people who took the pledge at some point during their adolescence broke it before they wed. Those who are unwavering about the pledge fare better than those who are inconsistent in their reports of pledging. Some suggest that pledgers are more likely to acquire an STD, or put their fellow adolescents at risk by underestimating their own. Perhaps, but real pledges *kept* are clearly effective. They're just uncommon. The pledge *is* effective, though, in delaying first sex and diminishing adolescents' number of sexual partners (and thus lifetime exposure to STDs).

Third, abstinence pledgers—especially girls—are idealists. They expect a lot from marriage and married sex, perhaps too much. On the other hand, numerous sexually active adolescents call sex "no big deal." Sex *is* a big deal, however. Married adults who cheat on their spouses are rarely greeted with apathy. There will always remain a link between sex and conceptions about what a good life looks like.

Fourth, motivations to have or to avoid sex are one step closer in time to actual decisions to engage or refrain. The magnitude of religious effects on sexual motivations (especially guilt) is notable. Church or mass attendance and/or religious salience are associated with more extensive anticipation of guilt from sex, the loss of respect from one's sexual partner, upsetting one's mother, and being embarrassed if pregnancy were to result.

Fifth, emotional readiness is a popular (if obscure) guide for many teenagers to gauge sexual preparedness. Defining emotional readiness, however, is difficult. Some explain it as "when they are ready," "when they're comfortable with it," or "when they won't freak out afterward." Other norms governing adolescents' prospective sexual relationships include the duration of the relationship (at least three months), emotional sentiment (sex should be a special thing), and the use of contraception. In sum, adolescents are emotionally ready when they say they are, even if they're really not, because there is no good barometer they can use to learn the truth, if it can be known. Religious youth are far more apt to disagree with the emotional readiness barometer.

Sixth and finally, most religiously conservative youth tend to articulate a set of boundaries about romantic relationships that could be summarized as "nothing beyond holding hands and kissing." They tend to advocate avoiding in private what would embarrass them in public. While evangelical

psychologists have gone on record as suggesting that stifling masturbation may be worse than tolerating it, most evangelical pastors and authors of guides on adolescent sexuality tend to frown on the practice. Whether most American adolescents do or do not masturbate—and, if so, how often—unfortunately cannot be documented using the Add Health or NSYR data.