

EXCERPT



Sexuality Beyond Sex

An Unexpected Conversation on Embodiment, Identity, and Desire

November 3, 2026 | \$21.99, 224 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1356-4

In *Sexuality Beyond Sex*, friends Dr. Gregory Coles and Dr. Julia Hejduk explore what our capacity and desire for sex can teach us about being human and, even more importantly, what sexuality can teach us about God. Together they offer the rich gifts of honest dialogue across differences, writing from their unique perspectives as a straight married Catholic woman (Julia) and a gay celibate Protestant man (Greg).

“Sexuality matters, even if we’re not having sex.”

We, Greg and Julia, are convinced that Christianity offers a better and more hopeful vision for human sexuality. We believe our sexuality reflects something deeply true—something significant, something divine—about all our human stories. And we believe sexuality does this whether or not we ever have sex. God created our sexual bodies, our capacity for sexual desire, and announced that all of it was “very good”! We’re convinced that when God said those words, he wasn’t just talking about married people. He was talking about all of us.

We think sexuality matters, even if we’re not having sex. And we think it’s worth talking about.

As we launch into this conversation, we can’t ignore our differences. We’re writing as two people with different genders (male and female), marital statuses (single and married), sexual orientations (gay and straight), and faith traditions (Protestant and Catholic). The deeper we dive into this book’s questions, the more obvious some of our differences will become.

The biggest divide between us is our Protestant/Catholic difference. This difference in theological tradition has a number of practical consequences. For instance, you’ll notice that we approach the Bible somewhat differently. We both agree with Paul when he says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). But we place different levels of emphasis on what the Catholic Church calls the “unity of the whole of Scripture” and “[t]he living tradition of the whole Church.” That is, Catholic Julia is more likely to draw on Catholic tradition to connect the dots between Scripture’s stories and read deeper meaning into their details. Protestant Greg will often respond with something like, “Hmm, intriguing . . . but not sure I buy it.”

Our Catholic/Protestant difference also plays out in how we approach specific questions about sexual ethics within marriage. When it comes to the big picture of sexual ethics, we’re totally on the same page: We believe that sexual activity for followers of Jesus belongs exclusively in a lifelong marital union between a man and a woman. (And if you disagree with us about this big picture, we’re still so glad you’re joining us for the conversation.) But Julia also holds the Catholic position that sexual activity within a marital union must be *ordered toward the giving of life*—an ethical boundary that Pope John Paul II discusses at length in his influential *Theology of the Body* (John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, translated by Michael Waldstein, Pauline Books and Media, 2006). Naturally, this position has significant implications for questions about contraception, oral sex, masturbation, and much more. Greg is sympathetic to the Catholic position on these questions, but he also hesitates to draw clearer ethical boundaries around sex than the ones he sees drawn within Scripture itself.

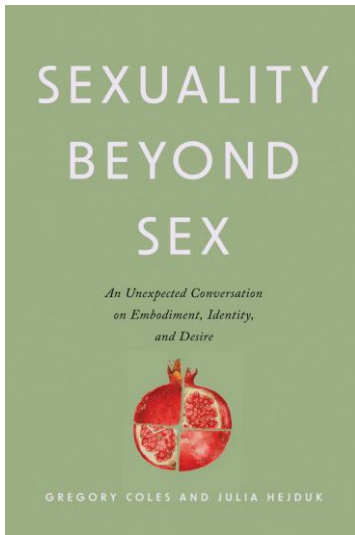
Here’s where our book takes the sexuality discussion in a fresh direction. Instead of letting these differences derail our conversation, we’re stepping back to examine the bodily and spiritual experience of sexuality—an experience that’s not defined or limited by sexual activity. Our culture places an inordinate emphasis on sexual activity, on what our *bodies* do or don’t do. Rooted deep in Scripture and tradition, however, is the idea that Jesus is the Bridegroom of every human soul. Throughout Christian history, there have been women and men who fell so deeply in love with him that they were willing to give up everything—even the joys of sexual intimacy, of biological family, of life itself.



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The world might call such people deluded. Christianity calls them disciples.

Every one of these disciples was a human being with a sexual body and an experience of sexuality. They weren't all using their bodies and sexualities to have sex: Some were single and celibate for their entire lives, and others chose to abstain from sex even within their marriages. (These marriages are called "Josephite marriages" in the Catholic tradition; we talk more about these in chapter one.) But every one of them lived as if their whole body was devoted to Jesus the Bridegroom.

How would your life look different if you lived this way? How would your relationship to your body and sexuality look different?

The two of us see the beauty and grace of Jesus in one another. It's why we became friends, why we stay friends, and why we have so much fun navigating hard conversations like this one. Whether or not you agree with what either of us has to say in this book, we hope you're encouraged by how the conversation unfolds. We hope it inspires you to celebrate the beauty and grace of Jesus in your own Christian siblings, even and especially in the places you disagree.

We also hope this book inspires you to rethink what you thought you knew about sexuality—both in your own life and in the human story as a whole. Maybe it seems obvious to you that sex is for pleasure, or for expressing your identity, or for making babies, and the more you can optimize at least one of these things, the happier you'll be.

And yet, as The Misfit in Flannery O'Connor's story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" complains of Jesus, "He thrown everything off balance." When Jesus declares the Church his Bride, he overturns our assumptions about what marriage truly is. When he rises from the dead and ascends into heaven in a physical body, he redefines the purpose of our own physical bodies. In a twist worthy of God's preposterous, upside-down kingdom, the prophetic witness of Christians whose sexuality doesn't fit the norm might become one of the tools God is using to remind all of us what our sexuality is actually for.

Sexuality can't just be about sex. It's much too important for that.

—adapted from the introduction



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Gregory Coles (PhD, Penn State) is a writer, speaker, and language scholar. He is the author of *Single, Gay, Christian; No Longer Strangers*; and *The Limits of My World*. Greg lives in Boise, Idaho, where he serves as senior research fellow at The Center for Faith, Sexuality, and Gender.

What if Sexuality Is About Something More Important than Sex?

What led each of you to the realization that a book like *Sexuality Beyond Sex* is needed?

Gregory Coles: In having conversations with unmarried Christians about their celibacy, I found many of them were struggling with the feeling that their sexuality was being wasted in their singleness—or that having a sexual body at all was a bad thing for a single person. I wanted to wrestle with that question in writing, offering ways single people can use our bodies and sexualities positively, even and especially when we're not having sex.

Julia Hejduk: When my teenage son came out to me, it caused tremendous anguish and confusion. Right now, Christianity offers two main options, both of which are unacceptable to me: to discard two thousand years of church teaching and affirm same-sex marriage, or to treat gay people as defective (or worse). I believe that God is calling Greg and me to help reunite and rejuvenate the Church by showing that non-straight people have a crucial role to play in the economy of salvation.

A lot of books have been written on sexuality. What is distinctive about *Sexuality Beyond Sex*?

Greg & Julia:

1. We take seriously the implications of the Bible's love story between God and humanity: The ultimate purpose of sexuality for *all* people is our eternal union with God.
2. Whereas most books about sexuality are significantly focused on sexual behavior, we're stepping back to examine the bodily and spiritual experience of being people with sexual bodies and the capacity for sexual desire, even and especially when we're *not* having sex.
3. We cast a positive vision for sexuality within celibate singleness, exploring ways celibates can still experience their sexual embodiment as a good thing.
4. We spend a whole chapter on the relationship between sexuality and the Eucharist.
5. We approach this topic as a dialogue between two people with very different backgrounds and experiences: a straight married Catholic woman and a celibate gay Protestant man.

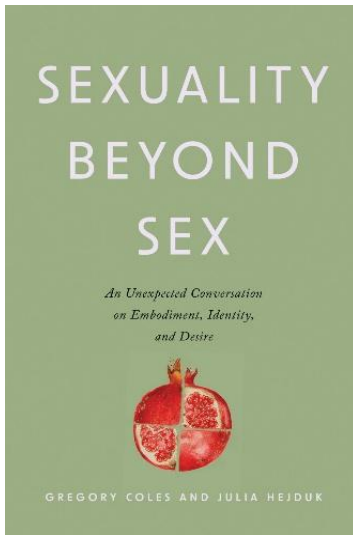
What do each of you hope readers take away from this book?

Julia:

- Our culture idolizes biological family, but Jesus teaches that spiritual family is even more important.
- Jesus' mystical marriage with us was consummated on the cross, and we cannot experience true intimacy with him unless we join him there.
- There's a reason Jesus gave us two parents! When Mary is forgotten, everything goes askew.
- It's partly because we've idolized marriage that marriage is in such trouble; to save marriage, we need to reclaim celibacy and recognize that it is the higher vocation.
- The Eucharist is a wedding in which our union with our Bridegroom is consummated by taking his body into our own.



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Q & A



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Julia D. Hejduk (PhD, Harvard) is the Reverend Jacob Beverly Stiteler Professor of Classics at Baylor University. She has written several books on Latin poetry, most recently *The God of Rome: Jupiter in Augustan Poetry*, and articles for journals such as *Christian Scholar's Review* and *Church Life Journal*. She and her husband live in Waco, Texas.

Greg:

- Our sexuality points to Jesus as Bridegroom and us (the Church) as Bride.
- We've gotten confused about what sexuality is because we've turned it into an idol instead of an icon.
- Chastity—the successful integration of sexuality within the person—bears fruit whether people are single or married.
- The Eucharist is a bodily consummation of our ultimate marriage with Jesus.
- Attraction to the same sex is not incompatible with sainthood.

Who did each of you have in mind as you wrote this book?

Greg: I recently had a conversation with an unmarried friend in her thirties who feels unsure if marriage might still be in her future, or if it's time for her to anticipate lifelong singleness and settle into that vocation. I had the joy of reminding her that, whether or not marriage in this lifetime is part of her story, an Ultimate Marriage with Jesus awaits us both; our bodies and sexualities won't be wasted! In writing this book, I wanted to speak hope and encouragement to this friend and countless others like her.

Julia: My most important audience is my gay son (and people like him), who recently left the Catholic Church to join an affirming Episcopal church. My second most important audience is parents like me, who have experienced anguish and confusion on finding that their children's sexuality didn't fit the norm. I also want to inspire—or re-inspire—Protestants and Catholics with the compelling beauty of God's love story, in which I believe nonstraight people are called to play a crucial prophetic role.



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