

PSYCHOLOGY

SEXUALITY AND SEX THERAPY: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal by Mark A. Yarhouse and Erica S. N. Tan. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014. 356 pages, references, index. Hardcover; \$35.00. ISBN: 9780830828531.

Christians often flounder when faced with challenging questions about sexuality in themselves, their families, their communities, and seek clarity and guidance from psychotherapists or pastors. In *Sexuality and Sex Therapy*, Yarhouse and Tan survey and evaluate the current state of research and clinical practice, grounded in Christian theological beliefs in the goodness of our sexuality, the distortions of sin, and the promise of redemption.

The authors are leaders in sex research, theory, clinical practice, and training within the broad evangelical Christian umbrella. They are well qualified to write this book, and for the most part write it clearly, accessibly, and with a professional, thoughtful, compassionate, holistic approach.

The book is divided into four sections. The first lays out foundational perspectives—theological, sociocultural, biological, and clinical—and the last section returns explicitly to these worldview questions. These are the most helpful parts for readers who are not practicing clinicians. The middle two sections focus on the problems clients bring to sex therapy—sexual disorders and dysfunctions—and also issues around gender and sexuality identity.

In a combination text and workbook style, within each chapter the authors provide “application boxes” that raise issues and ask key questions, helping readers to identify their own attitudes, values, and beliefs around sexuality and to consider how these affect their interaction with clients. While the chapters that address specific sexual issues are a bit repetitive for someone reading from cover-to-cover, they are structured so clinicians can extract guidelines and ideas without re-reading the entire book.

The authors are up to date in their knowledge of research on sexuality, and have also included the most recent diagnostic categories for sexual disorders from the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM-5). They handle this information deftly and with a thoughtful, critical eye. Their sensitivity to limits and complexity will be of help to therapists and pastors who may not be equipped to do that evaluation themselves.

For people interested in science and religion dialogue, the book provides an example of how a particular set of Christian beliefs around sexuality might be expressed in the context of sex therapy. Yarhouse and Tan are not prescriptive about specifics; rather, they challenge readers to think about their own values, beliefs, and assumptions, and to consider how these affect their approach to clients seeking help in the area of sexuality. They also model good clinical practice in that they encourage readers to focus on their *clients’* values, struggles, and needs.

The authors are attempting to do several things with this book: provide an overview of current understandings of sexuality and its disorders and dysfunctions, possible treatments, appropriate professional practice guidelines, and the implications of Christian perspectives. It is impossible to do all of these areas justice in a single volume. The result is that in places the book is frustratingly vague. Descriptions of sexual dysfunctions, their possible causes, and treatment options are not sufficiently detailed for therapists who do not already have background in these areas. These sections might actually be more helpful for people experiencing these dysfunctions themselves or for pastors who wish for a bit of an overview. More importantly for readers interested in science and religion is the fact that the foundational chapters at the beginning and the end are not deeply integrated with the specific sexual issues described in the middle. To their credit, the authors structure the book to encourage readers to engage in their own processes of integration. Nevertheless, it would be helpful for the authors to be more explicit about the ways in which they see Christian faith making a difference in sex therapy.

The chapter on “Sexual Identity Conflicts” is an interesting and distinctive take on the topic of sexual orientation. Questions of sexual identity are highly conflicted and contested, especially among Christians. Yarhouse and Tan attempt to tread lightly, thoughtfully, and compassionately while at the same time suggesting that the claims of major US mental health organizations, such as the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychological Association, are oversimplified. Such claims include the beliefs that sexual orientation is innate and immutable, something that one discovers rather than develops, and that attempts at prevention or treatment are harmful and unethical. Consistent with Yarhouse’s previous work on sexual identity, the authors distinguish among sexual attractions, sexual orientation, and sexual identity. They point out that people have choices about how they understand and respond to their sexual attractions, and when persons have sexual desires that expressed would put them in conflict with their own or their faith community’s beliefs, they may need support to navigate this struggle. Yarhouse

and Tan are careful to acknowledge that therapy rarely results in significant change in a person's sexual orientation or attractions. They focus instead on the importance of recognizing clients' social and cultural contexts, and helping them toward an integrated identity, one that takes into account the clients' beliefs, values, context, and desires.

While there is much to applaud in Yarhouse and Tan's deft exploration of Christian perspectives on sexuality and sex therapy, they clearly evince a view of Christian sexual ethics that is pretty standard evangelical American fare: Sexual expression is ideally exclusive to those in heterosexual marriage. For example, their discussion of sexual identity quite clearly implies that sexual attractions to any but the "other" sex are problematic to committed Christians and must be dealt with—not, to be sure, through enforced treatment, and not without deep compassion. While they encourage therapists to be open to the possibility that their clients may choose to adopt a "gay identity," the main message suggests that, for the committed Christian, there are better alternatives. Though I deeply appreciate their nuancing of the issues involved, I wish they had extended their focus slightly to include the communities within which people struggle with questions of sexuality. There is little here that acknowledges the profound anguish, heartache, and family struggles that are often associated with a Christian daughter or son identifying as gay. All the attention is on the person struggling with their sexual desires, when there may also be an important place for Christian therapists to speak to families and communities whose fears, attitudes, and beliefs often contribute significantly to their clients' pain.

This focus on the individual or couple is a general weakness of the book. While therapists' and pastors' primary concern is for the person or couple seeking their support, these clients live in a context, as Yarhouse and Tan repeatedly acknowledge. Yet nowhere in the book is there much suggestion that perhaps the context, not the client, is the problem. I was also disappointed that the foundational material in the first four and the last chapters did not make reference to some truly excellent work by scholars such as Margaret Farley or Lisa Sowle Cahill. While it is impossible to cite everyone who has weighed in on these topics, a broader range of perspectives would have deepened this material, and provided some food for thought regarding the possible limits of the "standard" evangelical view of sexuality.

Overall, this is a fairly accessible book that would be of use to Christian pastors and therapists who occasionally deal with clients struggling with sexuality. For those interested in science and Christian faith discussions and their implications for the "culture wars"

around sexuality, this book is worth considering. The thought exercises should stimulate critical engagement with the issues and help readers to thoughtfully digest other excellent books on these topics.

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RELIGION & SCIENCE

SEX ITSELF: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome by Sarah S. Richardson. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2013. 320 pages. Hardcover; \$45.00. ISBN: 9780226084688.

It seems that humans have an intrinsic compulsion to classify elements in God's creation: to express a taxonomic urge. Perhaps this urge is a result of God instructing humans to name each living creature from the beginning (Genesis 2:19–20), or perhaps it is a natural reaction to the overwhelming diversity in creation. Regardless of the origin or intent, the taxonomic urge includes classifying sex and gender. Sociologists attempt to determine the influence these two components have upon individuals in society. Psychologists attempt to assess differences in male and female brains. Biologists attempt to describe the molecular mechanisms involved in forming males and females.

Predictably, the topics of sex and gender have not escaped the church. Many of the major controversies in the Christian community circle around these topics, perhaps more now than ever before. Many denominations continue a multi-decade conversation wrestling with the implications of sex and gender for ordination and sexual orientation. Heading into these conversations, it is important to realize that even the scientific methods of defining the mechanisms of how we become male or female are blurred, perhaps more than the general population realizes. Our attempts have tended to work toward reducing complex issues into overly simplistic categorizations. In the book, *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome*, Sarah Richardson highlights the biases and inadequacies that have influenced the formation of what it means to be male and female—even at a genetic level.

Trained as a developmental biologist, I began reading Richardson's book hoping for an in-depth examination of the genetic cases that defy current bifurcated gender categories. Instead, however, Richardson succeeds in accomplishing something different. Utilizing reviews of historical, philosophical, and gender studies, she brings to the forefront of the discussion the evidence that science is not immune to the influences of culture and