# Christianity and sexuality - strange bedfellows, according to a new book



Diarmaid MacCulloch's latest contribution to the field of religious studies, Lower than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity, delves deeply into the complex and often contentious relationship between sexuality and Christianity throughout history. Comprising 660 pages and published by Viking, it navigates a landscape filled with diverse attitudes towards sexual intimacy, including same-sex relationships, across various Christian traditions.

MacCulloch, a professor emeritus at Oxford and a deacon in the Anglican Church who is openly gay, presents his findings as part of an ongoing dialogue within Christianity. Drawing on historical instances of sexual liberation within Christian contexts, MacCulloch references the Moravian Church's "sifting time" in the 1740s when leaders encouraged sexual intimacy outside of marriage. He contrasts this period of sexual exploration with earlier and later examples, such as a dissident Orthodox sect in 18th-century Russia, which mandated severe measures against sexual lust, including self-mutilation.

The book examines contradictions within Christian theology concerning sex, illustrating the lack of a unified Christian doctrine on sexuality. MacCulloch asserts, “There is no such thing as a single Christian theology of sex.” Instead, Christian views have fluctuated drastically over time, shaped by individual thinkers and societal structures.

Historical insights are drawn from ancient texts and philosophies that inform modern understandings of sexuality. MacCulloch traces the origins of sexual reform movements and governing doctrines back to early Christian thinkers like St. Jerome, whose austere views on marriage stemmed from philosophical beliefs rooted in Pythagorean thought that condemned sexual acts not directly linked to procreation.

He explores the influence of Judaism on these views, highlighting figures like the prophet Hosea, who associated sexual misconduct with divine disfavor, particularly directing his admonitions at women. The restrictive attitudes towards sexuality found in Christian texts often reflect a long-standing patriarchal framework that favours male interpretation of divine will, resulting in a legacy of regulation surrounding sexual identities and behaviours.

In bringing this historical analysis to bear on contemporary issues, MacCulloch addresses the current state of religious discourse, highlighting a prevailing tone of conservatism that often manifests as anger against changing gender roles. He notes that such anger reveals cultural shifts that threaten traditional male privilege, linking these transformations to the rise of diverse sexual and gender identities.

The book poses important questions about the way forward for faith communities, particularly in light of rising conservatism and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals and women. MacCulloch indicates that historical acceptance of sexual variance within Christianity contrasts sharply with present-day attitudes within some factions of the church. He contends that the actions and beliefs of men have too often dictated rigid views on sexuality that ignore the complexities and possibilities intrinsic to human relationships.

MacCulloch’s work not only invites consideration of historical injustices but also highlights the voices of women and other marginalized groups throughout history, such as Hildegard of Bingen and Jane Schaberg, whose innovative theological perspectives challenge established norms. These figures represent a long-standing tradition of questioning and redefining the spiritual landscape that continues to evolve today.

In concluding his examination, MacCulloch expresses hope for a reformed understanding within Christianity that embraces diverse sexual experiences and identities. "Lower than the Angels" therefore serves as a significant exploration of the intersections of faith, sexuality, and power dynamics over centuries, ultimately encouraging readers to reconsider the frameworks through which they understand both sexuality and spirituality.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.heywoodhill.com/shop/lower-than-the-angels> - This webpage provides information about Diarmaid MacCulloch's book 'Lower than the Angels,' which explores the complex relationship between Christianity and sexuality throughout history. The book questions if human beings' approaches to sex and sexuality make them 'lower than angels' in a biblical sense.
* <https://www.rizzolibookstore.com/product/lower-angels-history-sex-and-christianity> - This page offers details about MacCulloch's book, including its publication by Viking and its exploration of sexual emotion, activity, gender relations, and more within Christianity. The book examines historical interactions and contemporary anxieties around these topics.
* <https://congregationallibrary.org/events/lower-than-the-angels> - This event listing highlights a discussion around MacCulloch's work, focusing on how 'Lower than the Angels' aims to calm fears and encourage understanding of Christianity's complex history with sex and gender. It encourages an open-hearted dialogue about sexual variance within Christianity.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diarmaid_MacCulloch> - This page provides biographical information about Diarmaid MacCulloch, including his role as Emeritus Professor of the History of the Church at Oxford and his contributions to religious studies, which are foundational to understanding the context of 'Lower than the Angels'.