

Christianity and Masturbation: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Within the Christendom, Christian views split into 3 main camps: Catholic/Orthodox, Conservative Protestant, and Mainline/Liberal Protestant. None of the views claim Scripture directly says “masturbation is X;” so the arguments come from interpreting broader passages on sexuality, lust, and the body. Christendom did not treat masturbation as a major issue from the start. This became a distinct sin or crime over time through theology, canon law, and later medicine. In Catholic, Orthodox, and many conservative Protestant traditions, masturbation is seen as a sin committed against the body, since our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within us. “Sexual immorality” (*porneia*) includes acts outside marital intercourse. Masturbation is sin against the body because it involves lustful use of the body. The paper looks at some of the issues surrounding masturbation and proffers solutions toward its eradication in our contemporary world, such that humanity can live a life acceptable unto God our creator.

KEYWORDS: *Christendom, Christians, masturbation, sexuality, lust, body/temple, canon law, sin, crime, Holy Spirit, sexual immorality.*

INTRODUCTION

The word “masturbation” comes from the Latin word *masturbari*, “Onanism” comes from the biblical figure Onan in Genesis 38, though scholars debate whether that passage actually described masturbation, as shown in Figure 1.

Masturbation is the self-stimulation of one’s own genitals for sexual arousal or other sexual pleasure, usually to the point of orgasm, as shown in Figure 2. This is done by touching, rubbing, or applying pressure to the genitals and can be done alone or with a partner. It is said to be widespread across cultures, genders, and age groups. The Kinsey Reports found 92% of men and 62% of women reported having masturbated. Modern surveys consistently show that it is a normal sexual behavior for most people. According to current medical consensus, masturbation is seen as normal and not physically harmful for most people. It is believed to relieve sexual tension, help with sleep, and aid in learning about one’s own sexual response. However, the compulsive use that interferes with daily life, work, or relationships is sometimes treated as a behavioral

issue. Catholic and Orthodox Christianity teach it as being intrinsically disordered because it separates sexual pleasure from procreation and marital union. Conservative Protestantism sees it as sinful, citing 1 Corinthians 6: 18-20 and Matthew 5: 28. Positions held by Mainline Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism ranges from prohibition to acceptance depending on the tradition and interpretation [1-4], as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

There was shift of attitudes from indifference/acceptance in antiquity and moral sin in medieval/early modern periods and “medical disease” in the 18th-19th Centuries and normalization in the 20th Century.

1. Ancient and pre-modern views: Mostly neutral or pragmatic

➤ **Ancient world:** Masturbation was rarely a major concern. In Egyptian myth, the god Atum created the universe by masturbating; pharaoh ritually did the same into the Nile. Greeks saw it as normal, if

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more common among non-elites. Romans viewed it as natural but secondary to intercourse [4].

➤ **Early Jewish/Christian thought**

During this period, this was not a major focus. Some authors argued that the ancient world “cared little about masturbation.” Medieval theologians later classified it as a mortal sin, often analogous to murder, but it was not invested with the same weight as adultery or fornication. The anonymous author of the pamphlet *Onania* in 1716 was very worried about masturbation. He described it as a ‘shameful vice’, the ‘solitary act of pleasure’, too terrible to even be described [5-7].

2. 1712-1800: **Birth of the “solitary vice” as a moral-medical problem**

The modern panic started in the Enlightenment.

➤ **1716:** The anonymous pamphlet *Onania*, or *the Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution*, frames masturbation as a specific, dangerous sin with physical consequences. Historian Thomas Laqueur dates the creation of masturbation as a distinct moral-medical issue to ~1712 [2, 5, 6].

➤ **1758/1760:** Swiss physician Samuel Tissot published *Onania* and *On Onania*, linking masturbation to insanity, weakness, epilepsy, blindness, and death. His work went through 60+ editions and shaped Euro-American medicine for a century [4, 7].

3. **19th century: “Masturbatory insanity” and medical crusade**

➤ **Medical consensus:** By 1800s, European and American physicians agreed that masturbation caused insanity. Jean Esquirol declared in 1838 it as being “recognized in all countries as a cause of insanity” [1, 8].

➤ **Claims:** This was blamed for neurasthenia, neurosis, impotence, consumption, epilepsy, blindness, and “two-thirds of all diseases” [9].

➤ **Treatments:** Physical restraints, chastity belts, spiked penis rings, bromide sedatives, circumcision, and in extreme cases surgical “wiring.” In the US the anti-masturbation campaign lasted longer and was more intense than in Europe [10, 11].

➤ **Religious + medical fusion:** The idea of sin merged with medicine. Masturbation became both immoral and dangerous.

4. **Early-mid 29th century: Decline of the disease model**

➤ **Sexology and psychoanalysis:** Havelock Ellis and Freud challenged the old view. Freud initially saw it as harmful, later linked it to repression. By

the 1920s-30s, “masturbatory insanity” was being rejected [12].

➤ **Kinsey Reports 1948/1953:** In the report, it was found that 92% of men and 62% of women masturbated, undermining the idea that it was rare or pathological [6].

➤ **Diagnostic change:** Masturbation was removed from the DSM-II in 1968. The American Medical Association declared it normal in 1972 [1].

5. **Late 20th century to present:**

Normalization, with lingering stigma

➤ Modern medicine has found no causal link to mental or physical disorders. It is treated as a normal function like eating or sleeping [3, 6].

➤ Some religious and cultural taboos remain, and compulsive use is still treated clinically, but the old disease model has been abandoned [13].

Why the shift happened

Historians pointed to 3 factors, which are:

1. **Enlightenment “medicalization”:** Sins were recast as diseases [14].

2. **Bourgeois values:** Self-control, productivity, and closed-off body image made solitary sex seem threatening [15].

3. **Commercial interests:** The 18th-century anti-masturbation literature was tied to the venereal disease trade [15, 16].

CHRISTIAN VIEWS ON MASTURBATION

The Christian views on masturbation is based on tradition and historical development vis-a-vis:

1. **Early church and church fathers**

➤ **Clement of Alexandra** c. 200 AD spoke against acts that cause “injury to nature,” which scholars read as including both coitus interruptus and masturbation.

➤ **Augustine of Hippo** 354-430 condemned all sexual acts contrary to procreation, including “solitary pleasure” and “mutual masturbation” as “unnatural intercourse” based on Romans 1.

➤ **John Cassian** used the word *immunditia* “uncleanness” for both masturbation and nocturnal emissions, calling it an unacceptable form of sexual release.

➤ **Caesarius of Arles** 470-543 wrote that even saints could be defiled by nocturnal temptations to masturbate, and classified sexual arousal as a serious sin.

2. **Medieval period**

➤ **Thomas Aquinas** called masturbation an “unnatural vice,” a species of lust like bestiality

and sodomy. He said procuring ejaculation “without any copulation, for the sake of venereal pleasure” pertains to the sin of “uncleanness” or “effeminacy.”

- **Aquinas** held that sins against nature were worse than sins against neighbor, which led later writers to claim he thought masturbation worse than rape. This is seen as a misreading.

3. Reformation

- **Girolamo Savonarola** believed that masturbation was a mortal sin.
- **Andreas Karlstadt and Martin Luther** saw it as a grave sexual transgression. Luther wrote that he pitied those tormented by it and called it “more terrible than heterosexual rape” because it was “unnatural” and involved “killing children before they have a chance to be born.”

4. Modern Catholic Church

- The Catechism of the Catholic Church 2352 states that masturbation is “intrinsicly and gravely disordered” because it separates sexual pleasure from procreation and the unitive purpose of marriage.
- It adds that psychological factors, habit, and immaturity can reduce moral responsibility.

5. Eastern Orthodox Church

It views it generally as a passion to be overcome through ascetic practice. The emphasis is on confession, healing, and spiritual growth rather than legal categories.

6. Protestant views

- **Conservative/Evangelical:** Typically see it as sinful, citing Matthew 5: 28, 1 Corinthians 6: 18-20, Genesis 38: 9-10, and the misuse of the body.
- **Mainline/Liberal:** Many do not classify it as sin, arguing that the Scripture did not address it directly and it is a private matter unless harmful or compulsive [2, 17].

CURRENT RESEARCH WORK

Current research on masturbation (within 2023-2025) shows:

1. Physical and mental health effects

- **No harmful long-term effects:** Multiple 2023-2025 reviews confirm no evidence linking regular masturbation to organ damage, weakened immunity, infertility, or chronic illness.
- **Stress and mood:** A 2024 study found people who masturbate regularly had lower cortisol levels, indicating reduced chronic stress. There was also the report on improved mood, reduced anxiety, and better sleep via release of dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphins [18-20].

- **Sleep:** A 2019 survey of 778 adults found masturbation helped reduce time to fall asleep and improved sleep quality [18].

- **Pains and cramps:** Research show that it can relieve menstrual cramps and can act as a natural analgesic via endorphins [18, 21].

2. Prostate cancer and ejaculation frequency

- A 2023 case-control study with 456 men with prostate cancer and 427 without found men who ejaculated less frequently had a higher risk of prostate cancer [22].
- A 2016 literature review noted that 44% of studies found a link between frequent ejaculation and lower prostate cancer. However, accordingly to researchers more studies are required before drawing of conclusions.

3. Sexual and pelvic health

- **Women:** A 2024 study of women aged 18-80 found out that using a vibrator for 3 months improved sexual and pelvic floor function and lowered rates of depression [20], as shown in Figure 5.
- **Menopause:** A 2025 Kinsey Institute clinical study found after 4 weeks of regular self-stimulation that, 92.9% of participants reported at least one menopausal symptom less frequently, especially sleep, and mood swings. Women who achieved orgasm had the largest symptom reductions [20].
- **Sexual function:** Regular masturbation is associated with better understanding of sexual response, which can improve partnered sex [24-26].

4. Potential downsides

- **Physical:** It is known that rough technique can cause chafing, temporary swelling/edema, genital irritation, or pelvic pain [22, 27].
- **Psychological:** Compulsive or excessive masturbation that can interfere with daily life as linked to poorer mental health, guilt, anxiety, and depression in some studies. Another study found students with physical effects after masturbation were 12x more likely to report poor mental health [27, 28].
- **Context matters:** Outcomes vary based on frequency, compulsivity, guilt/shame, and whether it is ego-dystonic [29].

The general consensus by major health organizations such as Mayo Clinic, Cleveland Clinic, and Hospital Clinic Barcelona described masturbation as a normal, healthy behavior with more benefits than risks when

done in moderation, as shown in Figure 6 [19, 30, 31].

The Bible does not mention “masturbation” directly, but it cited a few passages that different traditions interpret as relating to it. In Genesis 38: 8-10, was the story of Onan, “And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother’s wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother. And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother’s wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother. And the thing which he did displeased the Lord: wherefore he slew him also.” The word “onanism” comes from this passage.

- **Traditional view:** This view says that God killed Onan for refusing to fulfill his levirate duty and for wasting seed. Some take this as a prohibition of masturbation.
- **Modern scholarly view:** Most biblical scholars say the sin was disobeying the levirate marriage duty and denying his brother and heir, not masturbation itself. Onan was having intercourse, just withdrawing before ejaculation.

In Matthew 5: 27-28, Jesus mentioned that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. Some Christian traditions use this to argue that masturbation accompanied by lustful thoughts violates Jesus’ teaching on the heart. Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 6: 18-20, on sexual immorality, says “Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.”

This is used by traditions that classify masturbation as sexual immorality. While others argue that the context is about prostitution and sexual union, not self-stimulation. The books of Ephesians 5: 3 and Colossians 3: 5, mentioned about purity, called for sexual purity and putting to death “sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires.” Some apply this to masturbation, while others limit it to extramarital sex.

CONCLUSION

If humanity is to reign with his Creator, that is God Almighty, the creator of the universe and all that exist, then we need to heed God’s commandments, among which is, “be ye holy as I am holy” - we are to remember our creator in the days our youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thy shalt say, I have no pleasure in them – Ecclesiastes

21: 1, and while verses 13 and 14 says, “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgement, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.” Hence, the urgent need to depart from all appearances of immorality and sins. It was for the salvation of humanity that Jesus Christ came to this world to redeem and save or deliver us from the power of sin. The cleansing blood of Jesus Christ is still available to deliver us from all our guilt and shame. The book of Revelation 9: 21 reminds us that all those who refuse to repent of their murders, sorceries, or their fornication, and of their thefts shall not escape God’s judgement. Heaven is real and hell is real, we need to surrender our life to God so that we can reign with Him. May He grant us this enablement. More information on Christianity and masturbation can be found in books in [32-38] and the following related journals:

Journal of Psychology and Theology

Journal of the American Academy of Religion

The Linacre Quarterly

Journal of Religious Health

Theology and Sexuality

Studies in Christian Ethics

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Figure 1. Masturbation

Source:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masturbation>



Figure 2. Orgasm

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orgasm>



Figure 3. Christian views on masturbation

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_views_on_masturbation

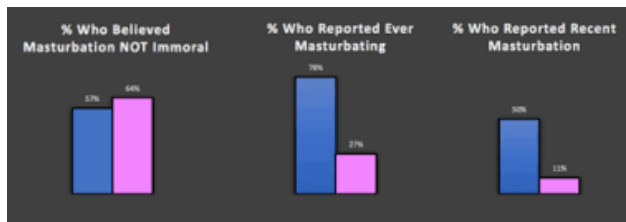


Figure 4. LDS Church and masturbation

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LDS_Church_and_masturbation



Figure 5. Vibrator (sex toy)

Source:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vibrator_\(sex_toy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vibrator_(sex_toy))



Figure 6. Human sexuality

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portal:Human_sexuality/Featured_picture/Archive