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by Julie Hanlon Rubio

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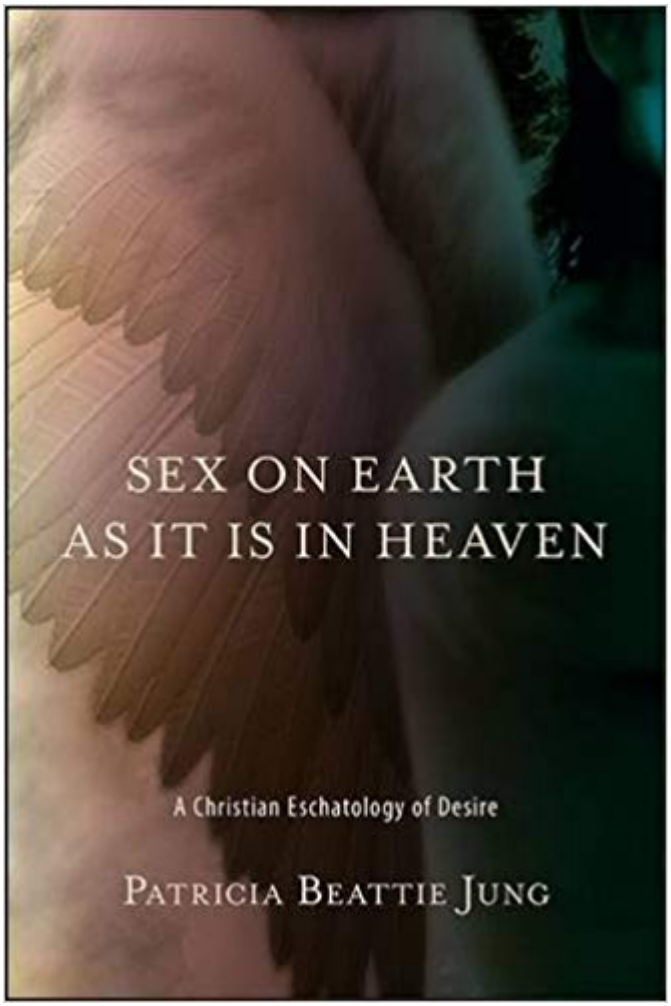
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Is there sex in heaven? Most theologians in the history of Christianity have said no. Theological ethicist Patricia Beattie Jung — author and editor of many books, including *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions* — claims that sex could be a part of an afterlife full of love of God and others. In *Sex on Earth as It Is in Heaven: A Christian Eschatology of Desire*, she convincingly argues that believing it could be so should inspire Christians in this world to make pursuing virtuous and pleasurable sex a priority.

Potential readers might wonder if we really need a book about the possibility of sex in heaven. We can't know for sure, so what's the point of speculating? Jung's survey of theologians throughout history who have commented on the question (for example, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Jerome and Origen) quickly puts to rest any concern about the obscurity of her topic. Acknowledging the lack of certainty in her project, she wisely makes the modest claim that sex *could* exist in the world to come, because it is consistent with traditional beliefs of the resurrection of the body, the goodness of creation and human destiny as union with God and other people. Theologians in the past who conflated sexual desire and lust or overemphasized the link between sex and procreation reasonably concluded that sex would be either inconsistent with heavenly perfection or just unnecessary. But because contemporary Christians have come to see sexual desire as longing for intimacy and sex as lovemaking, we are in a better position to consider how it could fit into heavenly life.



SEX ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN: A CHRISTIAN ESCHATOLOGY OF DESIRE
Patricia Beattie Jung
298 pages; SUNY Press

If we believed in "sex in heaven" would it change how we see "sex on Earth"? This is probably the most theologically significant point in the book, and the point on which many might disagree with Jung. Along with other contemporary theologians, Jung has written a lot about the importance of sexual intimacy and pleasure, but she thinks this important movement in Christian ethics is still languishing, because it can't escape the weight of sex-negativity that accompanies belief in sex tethered to Earth. Some might argue in an Augustinian key that the longing humans feel in sexual desire will be overtaken when we finally "rest in God." Perhaps sexual desire can be affirmed here regardless of what one believes about the afterlife. Still, the evidence Jung presents about the deficiencies of Christian teaching on sex, despite decades of the "sex is good" message, make her claims about the import of heaven difficult to rule out.

The practical part of Jung's argument points toward a new agenda for churches and Catholic groups. Jung rightly points out that there is actually very little formation on sexuality for adult Catholics. Outside youth, young adult singles and natural family planning circles, most Catholics hear very little about sex, especially good sex. But if sex is so central to who humans are as embodied, loving beings that it continues in heaven, then it follows that believers have an obligation to cultivate sexual desire, and churches should be helping them do that. Then the practice of sex would, like prayer, become something to pursue. By practicing well, we become more of the kind of people we are called to be.

How would churches have to change if they took up this task? As readers might suspect, Jung argues they would have to talk less about procreation and let go of teachings against contraception. But they would also need to do some other things, like explicitly uphold mutuality in sexual pleasure as crucial to intimacy, recognize that many women (perhaps most) do not find their most intense sexual pleasure in coitus, recommend other kinds of sexual acts that are more widely associated with pleasure for women (and not relegate them to foreplay) and encourage Christians to pursue sex even if desire lags.

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Both Jung's theoretical and her practical proposals are likely to be controversial in traditional Catholic circles. Yet, Jung's concerns are not completely foreign to contemporary Catholic sexual ethics. In his apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis lifts up the lovemaking potential of sex and encourages married couples to cultivate love, including sexual love. Like Pope John Paul II's theology of the body, Jung's theology seeks to learn from the body about the Creator's design for human beings called to love like God. Jung's desire to lift up lifelong, committed love is clear.

Progressive Catholics might seek greater clarity about whether Jung's project applies to Christians who identify as LGBTQ, and they might wonder if a sexual ethic with new obligations is really what the church needs. Jung's record as an advocate of sexual diversity is longstanding, though she might have emphasized it more in this text. But she does see an obligation to cultivate desire for good sex. Because desires, like emotions, are at least in part socially constructed, Jung argues that they must be critically evaluated in light of their compatibility with human flourishing.

This leads her to ask whether low or no sexual desire could be potentially problematic, in that it might lead people to devalue self-giving and relational intimacy. Instead of accepting it as inevitable, she urges working toward the admittedly risky, vulnerable, boundary-breaking practice of sexual loving. Conversely, she criticizes pornography because for the most part it cultivates desire for sex centered on the self, who holds power over virtual partners who do not talk back.

Thinking about sex in heaven may be just what Christians need to love passionately and well here on Earth.

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