Havelock Ellis, the prolific sexologist and social reformer, was a key participant in what George Mosse has described as a shift from the clergyman to the scientist as the guardian of normality. And yet, analysis of Ellis’ life (1859-1939) and work complicates the “priest to scientist” trajectory. Throughout his writing Ellis used the idea of the “sacred” to represent the sexual impulse, he borrowed the authority and respectability of priests for the new sexual scientist and the role of “saviour” for the eugenic project. In order to justify his claims he demonized women’s sexuality and religious excess in new ways. For Ellis the sexual impulse could be understood as a potent, “sacred” force in all aspects of life; those women, especially nuns, who denied this reality were shown to be mentally, physically and spiritually degenerate. In his writing about masturbation, particularly *Auto-Erotism* and its appendix, “The Auto-erotic Factor in Religion,” Ellis vilified women’s sexuality as being more prone to perversion than men’s and especially dangerous when these women did not conform with existing gender norms. This was partly a response to the growing popularity of sisterhoods during Ellis’ lifetime. Ellis saw these women as obstacles to eugenic progress.

Historians’ assessment of Ellis as a solely secular theorist limits our understanding of how closely scientific, sexual and spiritual knowledge(s) were interwoven at the time. It is difficult to deal with religious belief and spiritual experience within the confines of a discipline which defines itself – in implicit opposition to the irrationality and subjectivity of religion – as “rational” and “objective.” Analysis of Ellis’ work provides an entry point into the complicated interactions between science and religion around issues of sexuality, gender and race. This analysis is crucial for understanding the conflicts arising around sex education in schools, gay rights, labels such as “terrorists,” and responses to HIV/AIDS.
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To Robbie Benzan, who teaches me that every day is a gift, and shows me how laughter and love keep us alive.
As a young boy, one of Henry Havelock Ellis' frequent pastimes was writing sermons that he delivered to an audience of his two indulgent and admiring sisters, using the edge of the sofa as a pulpit.¹ Ellis later became a physician and his prolific writings as a sexologist and social reformer reflect his early leanings towards religious authority and prophesying. Ellis was a key participant in what George Mosse has described as a shift from the clergyman to the scientist as the guardian of normality.² And yet, analysis of Ellis' life and work complicates the "priest to scientist" trajectory. Ellis, like many Britons of his time, both questioned his religious beliefs and used Christianity to construct his identity and understanding of himself. As Callum Brown argues, discursive Christianity - a religious culture shaped by media - influenced and informed the way people in Britain understood their lives.³ Ellis positioned himself as a spiritual leader within the supposedly secular science of sexology, blurring the boundaries between spirituality and science. Throughout his writing Ellis used the idea of the "sacred" to represent the sexual impulse, he borrowed the authority and respectability of priests for the new sexual scientist and the role of "saviour" for the eugenic project. In order to justify his claims he demonized women's sexuality and religious excess in new ways. For Ellis the sexual impulse could be understood as a potent, "sacred" force in all aspects of life; those women, especially nuns, who denied

this reality were shown to be mentally, physically and spiritually degenerate. An exploration of Ellis' life and writings thus allows a rethinking of the relationships between science and religion, and the important role of gender and sexuality – especially women's sexuality – in that process.

The idea that religion is something to be outgrown is a construct of modernity; it is grounded in the work of Freud who saw religion as childish and even as a perversion if it continued into adulthood. As Gauri Viswanathan argues, scholars have challenged terms like "primitive" and "savage" but cultural historians and anthropologists have not contested Freud's assessment of religion. Historians of sex and culture as well as scholars in gay, lesbian and queer studies have challenged Freudian ideas of homosexuality as "arrested development." The same kind of analysis is needed in how academia deals with issues of spiritual experience and religion.

Havelock Ellis, who lived from 1859 to 1939, was a young man at a time when organized religion was struggling to meet the needs of a changing British public. The period from the 1880s onwards has become synonymous with the late-Victorian "crisis of faith" even though churches and chapels experienced significant growth well into the twentieth century. The Church of England, which grew faster than the overall population of Britain in the Victorian and Edwardian eras, reported that 9.8% of the population attended Easter Sunday services in 1911, the highest levels since 1801. Yet secularization, the decreasing importance of religion in society, is an issue that has attracted a great deal of attention from churchmen, religious scholars and historians. Traditionally many scholars have identified a

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connection between modernization and the decline of Christianity; Hugh McLeod identifies the beginning of dechristianization in Western Europe with the French Revolution, as it “opened the way to religious indifference.”

Within the scholarly debate around why Christendom declined in Western Europe are many linear, “slow and steady” decline theories. McLeod defines Christendom as a society where there were close ties between the leaders of the church and those in positions of secular power, where the laws purported to be based on Christian principles and where, apart from certain clearly defined outsider communities, every member of the society was assumed to be a Christian. The decline of Christendom is most popularly explained by the secularization thesis: the general decline of religious belief and religious institutions in modern societies. Many writers, including Emile Durkheim and Max Weber at the end of the nineteenth-century, have defended the principle that modernization and secularization are connected. More recently Steve Bruce has re-defined the secularization thesis as the process by which religion loses social significance, arguing that this has happened in every modern state, even in the United States where religious institutions appear to be thriving.

For many scholars the secularization thesis is a generally accepted description of religious decline, but most of those who specialize on this topic are skeptical about the broad application of this explanation. Although many scholars agree that it may be useful to describe what happened in Britain, Jeffrey Cox and other sociologists point out that this

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theory ignores the relationships between religion and modernity in other parts of the world.\textsuperscript{10} Callum Brown has gone much further in rejecting the traditional wisdom about secularization in his controversial book \textit{The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization 1800-2000}. While recognizing the reality of contemporary secularization in Britain he argues that traditional accounts – which present a gradual spread of secularization from the mid- to late-nineteenth century – underestimate the extent of secularization in the twentieth century and underestimate the rapidity of the process. Brown argues that Christianity remained central to British society and identity formation up until the 1960s. In Brown’s account, the culture of Britain from 1800 to 1963 was highly religious, and women formed the bulwark of popular support for Christianity. It was women who broke their relationship with Christian piety in the 1960s and thereby caused secularization.\textsuperscript{11} Brown and others also raise objections to the secularization theories because they depend on a much too narrow, institutional definition of religion and as a result overlook both popular religion and the wider diffusion of religious symbols and values in society.\textsuperscript{12} As Callum Brown’s work implies, the transition from priest to scientist as keeper of “normality” was not as simple as a “triumph of science” framework might suggest; instead the transition was partial and uneven.

Mosse’s account of the transition from priest to scientist is also complicated by the work of scholars who have rejected the “liberating” story of science. As Londa Schiebinger argues in her fascinating study \textit{Nature’s Body: Gender in the Making of Modern Science} the

\textsuperscript{10} J. Cox, “Secularization and Other Master Narratives of Religion in Modern Europe,” \textit{Kirchliche Zeitschrift} 14, no. 1 (2001): 34-35; also dealt with by such sociologists as David Martin, Grace Davie and Peter Berger.

\textsuperscript{11} Brown, 10.

gender assumptions of predominantly male scientists were interwoven into supposedly
“value-neutral” knowledge systems. With the Enlightenment came a new order that rested
not on the divine right of Kings but in Nature and natural law. As a result, the interpretation
of the natural world took on immense power for justifying existing social structures and
power dynamics as “natural.” Schiebinger’s work shows how science worked to justify
social inequalities like the slavery of Africans in the Americas and the continued
disenfranchisement of women by identifying marks of difference and “inferiority.”13
Scientists have also understood madness to be a women’s disease. Elaine Showalter reveals,
in her insightful and provocative account The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English
Culture, 1830-1980, how persistently “woman” represents madness in medical discourse and
cultural tradition.14 Showalter seeks to avoid romanticizing madness as a form of rebellion,
recognizing it instead as a desperate communication of the powerless; by dismantling the
connection between women and madness she exposes how ideas of gender influenced the
diagnosis and treatment of insanity.

During the period of 1870 through to World War I, when Darwinian psychology had
its strongest influence in Britain, hysteria played a peculiarly central role in psychiatric
discourse. Hysteria had long been a malady associated with women (its very name is derived
from the Greek hysteron, or womb) but by the end of the nineteenth century “hysterical” had
become almost interchangeable with “feminine” in psychiatric literature and represented all

13 One example from the eighteenth century is how Carl Linneaus’ zoological taxonomies worked to
naturalize the role of women in modern culture. Schiebinger argues that Linneaus coined the term
Mammalia to emphasize the natural role for females – human or non-human - to suckle their young at
a time of social and political upheaval in European society. Instead of choosing other shared
characteristics among this group, Linneaus’ taxonomies, with the focus on breast-feeding, reinforced
political and social assumptions for women through scientific language. Londa Schiebinger. Nature’s
14 Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980 (New
extremes of emotionality. Jeffrey Weeks describes the image of the hysterical woman as "the middle-class woman of leisure deprived of productive labour and imprisoned in dependence on her family"; symptoms included fits, fainting, vomiting, choking, sobbing, laughing and paralysis, with rapid transition from one to another. Unsurprisingly the Darwinian psychologists sought to find a physical cause for the rise in hysteria; they attributed hysteria to faulty heredity made worse by the biological and social crisis of puberty. While they focused on the physical causes they rarely recognized the significance of the restraints – on social and sexual behaviour – placed on women. The concept that these women were thwarted and unsatisfied in other aspects of their lives was not a medically appropriate explanation.

At a time when patriarchal culture felt itself under attack by the demands of women campaigning for access to universities, the professions and the vote it was useful to label these “deviants” as mentally unstable – the diagnosis of hysteria was tightly tied to the successes of the feminist movement. The treatments for hysteria were ruthless, a microcosm of the sex war intended to establish the male doctor’s total authority and compel the patient’s submission through lobotomies, dousing patients with cold water, “observant neglect,” and stopping the patient’s breathing, intimidation and ridicule. Intriguingly it was the rise in male hysteria (labeled “shell shock”) during and after World War I that showed the fallacies of Darwinian psychology’s approach to hysteria. It became clear that powerlessness could lead to pathology; losing the sense of control created lasting wounds. Showalter is

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16 Showalter, 130.
17 Ibid., 145-165.
18 Ibid., 137-138.
19 Ibid., 190.
convincing in her analysis of women’s nervous disorders as expressions of “the insoluble conflict between their desires to act as individuals and the internalized obligations to submit to the needs of the family.”\textsuperscript{20} The medicalization of women’s bodies as places of irrationality and madness worked to justify social inequality and structures of power.

As a sexologist, Henry Havelock Ellis contributed to this medicalization of women’s bodies even as he tried to challenge social inequalities. Ellis was the first scientist to write about issues of sexual behavior in a language and style that was accessible to popular culture. He wrote in English, without cloaking his more graphic descriptions in medical language and Latin, and he wrote extensively on the vast variety of sexual behavior. His writing challenged the society of his day and helped to form new “scientific” and moral divisions between acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior. Ellis reflected the scientific optimism of his time but rebelled against its mechanistic laws. He looked forward to a new Renaissance and incorporated this desire into his prolific writing on art, literature, travel, criminology, social policy, eugenics and most extensively, sexuality.

Most studies of Ellis present him as an exclusively secular writer, and his work as part of a move away from “religious” and toward “scientific” understandings of sexuality. It is important to note, however, that Ellis came from a strong religious background and while he turned away from evangelical Christianity he still sought to harmonize his changing spiritual beliefs with his sexual experiences and research. While there have been a number of studies of Ellis’ own sexual experiences, intellectual influences and political beliefs, little attention has been paid to his explicitly religious or spiritual attitudes and this dimension of

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 144.
his work.21 Because Ellis’ ideas, as Paul Robinson has shown in The Modernization of Sex, established “the basic moral categories for nearly all subsequent sexual theorizing,” this study of Ellis alerts us to new complexities in the broader history of sexuality.22

Havelock Ellis’ writing, particularly Auto-Erotism and its appendix, “The Auto-erotic Factor in Religion,” provide examples of how the medicalization of women’s bodies and secularization were tied together. These sections of his six-volume work Studies in the Psychology of Sex, published between 1897 and 1910, include scientific explanations of women’s auto-erotic impulses as well as criticisms of conventional religious expression. Among the many topics explored in the Studies – such as sexual inversion (homosexuality), marriage, eonism (transvestism) and sex education – Ellis included a detailed account of a broad category of behavior called auto-erotism. Ellis coined the term auto-erotism to describe “the phenomena of spontaneous sexual emotion generated in the absence of an external stimulus proceeding, directly or indirectly, from another person.” This definition excluded any contact with another person of either sex. Ellis considered the most common occurrence of auto-erotism to be the sexual orgasm during sleep, although it also included erotic daydreams, masturbation, narcissism and hysteria. It covered “those transformations of repressed sexual activity which are a factor of some morbid conditions as well as the

normal manifestation of art and poetry, and, indeed, more or less color the whole of life.”

For Ellis the sexual impulse could be understood as a potent, “sacred” force in all aspects of life. As we shall see, he drew special attention to the lives of female saints and ascetics as extreme examples of repression of sexual activity. In Ellis’ view, these women denied the “sacred” role of the sexual impulse to their physical, mental and spiritual detriment.

Ellis was one of the most liberal of the sexologists writing during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. His work can be read within the context of the Victorian “crisis of faith,” as guides for those who had lost fixed points of reference. As part of his effort to provide moral guidelines, Ellis turned a radically critical gaze on the received wisdom about masturbation. He argued that masturbation was practiced by all the “higher animals” and in his writing provided examples of the wide range of sexual behavior throughout the animal kingdom as well as showing the changing attitudes of peoples and cultures about sexuality.

Still, a close study of Ellis’ highly moralized scientific understandings of sexuality reveals a new dimension of early secular writings on sexuality. Here I draw on the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s rejection of what he calls the “repressive hypothesis,” a hypothesis that religion served only as a repressive force and that modern, secular liberation and enlightenment would allow for “natural” sexual behavior. Instead, Foucault argues, sexual subjectivity is produced and given meaning in the context of power (and struggles over power) within a culture. Historians of sexuality have paid scant attention to the relationship between sexuality and religion, to the detriment of the discipline.

24 Nottingham, 15.
25 Porter and Hall, 167.
Responses to Ellis’ work span the continuum of scholarly critique: he has been hailed as a sexual liberator and derided for his misogynistic agenda.\textsuperscript{26} His work as a sexologist, literary critic and reformer placed him amongst a group of social radicals who were questioning conventional mores; while he held some conservative views on sexual difference Ellis was committed to social change and in favor of improving the position of women in society.\textsuperscript{27} Ellis wrote the most detailed account of homosexuality (which he called “sexual inversion”) to appear before 1900; it was a crucial contribution to liberal views of homosexuality and, according to the historian Ivan Crozier, an important part of Ellis’ utopian secular politics.\textsuperscript{28} As Chris Waters has noted, Ellis’ term “congenital anomaly” also offered an alternative to Freudian psychoanalytic descriptions of homosexuality as “arrested development.”\textsuperscript{29} My analysis of Ellis’ use of religious symbols in understanding himself and the broad topic of sexual experience similarly challenges Freud’s ideas about spiritual experience and religion as “arrested development.”

Despite Ellis’ liberal leanings, scholars like Jeffrey Weeks, Paul Robinson and Alison Oram have all identified how Ellis was part of sexology’s efforts to establish new

\textsuperscript{26} Even Jeffrey Weeks, who is so critical in other respects, recognizes him as “one of the pioneer sexual enlighteners of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century,” quoted in Nottingham, 11; Ivan Crozier, “Taking Prisoners: Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud and the Construction of Homosexuality 1897-1951” Social History of Medicine, 13, (2000): 447-466.; Sheila Jeffreys, The Spinster and her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930 (London: Pandora Press, 1985); Margaret Jackson, The Real Facts of Life: Feminism and the Politics of Sexuality c1850-1940 (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994).

\textsuperscript{27} Lesley Hall, “Heroes or Villains? Reconsidering British fin de siecle Sexology and its Impact”, in New Sexual Agendas, ed. Lynne Segal, 3-16 (London: Macmillan, 1997).


codifications of gender roles and to normalize heterosexuality. Ellis’ assumption that sex differences were biologically determined through evolution led him to believe that women’s primary biological function was as the “mothers of the race”; this connected nicely with his own preoccupation with eugenics and “racial hygiene.” As Cynthia Eagle Russett argues, Ellis’ views on the primacy of women’s role as mothers made him the kind of friend women could do without.

Ellis’ biographers have also struggled to encompass and understand his life. Vincent Brome argued that Ellis was a repressed homosexual, while Arthur Calder-Marshall’s 1959 biography claimed that Ellis, despite his own claims to the contrary, was a Christian. Chris Nottingham’s study sought to broaden historian’s understanding of the scope of Ellis’ work, presenting him as a man who avoided the limelight but harnessed the progressive political ideas of his day in his writing. Agreeing with earlier biographers of Ellis (such as Phyllis Grosskurth) that his work lacked a coherent doctrine, Nottingham argues that Ellis’ life is an entry point into understanding the complexities of a new politics, one that included a range of issues, from the rights of women to the need for peace and the virtues of an open approach to human sexuality. In response to these divergent opinions I would argue that Ellis is difficult to pin down precisely because his own approach to the science of sex relied on an extensive reworking of religious themes. Responding to Ellis’ work and life is challenging for historians because of the inherent difficulty we face in dealing with religious

33 Grosskurth, 217.
belief and spiritual experience within the confines of a discipline which defines itself – in implicit opposition to the irrationality and subjectivity of religion – as “rational” and “objective.”

Havelock Ellis positioned himself as an arbiter of morality, bridging the gap between religion and science. It is through this persona as a scientific and religious pioneer that he recounted his life. He concluded the preface to My Life, for example, with a reflection on the tangled nature of life.

What from one point of view is tragic failure may from another angle be magnificent success, of which the story of Jesus is the immortal symbol. ... I know too well my own inefficiency; it has weighed on me from youth, and the disasters I have met have proved greater than even the melancholy of youth could forebode. My life has sometimes seemed a path to Calvary trodden with bleeding feet. Yet the roses of immortal beauty have blossomed whenever I trod. I have tasted the joys of Heaven on every side. The peace that passes all understanding has dwelt at my heart.34

Ellis relied on religious symbols and themes from the Christian culture in which he lived to understand and explain his life.

The major turning point in Ellis’ life was his “conversion,” which happened while working in the Australian bush as a schoolteacher. As a teenager, after abandoning the “simple-hearted” faith of his mother, Ellis was left with “a great blank” and reading agnostic writers or the paeans to science did not help fill the void. At nineteen, reading the work of James Hinton, “a man of science who was also, though he made no definite claim to the name, a mystic,”35 Ellis experienced a transformation:

In an instant, as it seemed, the universe was changed for me. I trod on air; I moved in light. An immense inner transformation had been effected, as it

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35 Ibid., 164.
seemed in a moment. Before long I was able to recognize that this transformation was what religious people had been accustomed to call a conversion.36

The spiritual and intellectual tension in his life was resolved. The “hopeless discrepancy” between “the divine vision of life and beauty” of his lost evangelical Christian faith and “the scientific conception of an evolutionary world which might be marvelous in its mechanism, but was completely alien to the individual soul and quite inapt to attract love” no longer existed.37 Through his conversion experience Ellis found a synthesis of faith and science.

From that moment on James Hinton (1822-1875) was a permanent intellectual presence in Ellis' life. Hinton’s father was a notorious dissenting preacher in London who openly questioned the literal truth of hell fire. Hinton was also influenced early on by his job as a cashier in a firm with premises in Whitechapel; his initial contacts with poverty led him to train as a doctor and to speculate on how to right the wrongs of the world. Hinton became active among small, progressive societies addressing issues of prostitution, education, and socialism. By the 1860s, his ideas had begun to attract a small band of followers, who pursued “Hintonism.” Hinton’s injunction to “love and do what you like” later became problematic with scandalous claims about Hinton’s polygamy and accusations that he used his status to obtain sexual favours from his women disciples. Despite all this, Ellis desperately tried to hold on to Hinton’s rather convoluted ideas and to preserve his spirit of iconoclasm. Ellis was instrumental in the posthumous publication of Hinton’s work The Law-Breaker which re-interpreted Christianity by de-emphasizing the rules and elevating the spirit; Ellis’ introduction to this work made Hinton’s message (and Ellis’ endorsement of it) clear: “It is Jesus who is the breaker of laws, that is, of arbitrary laws, setting up instead the

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
play of natural laws, the response to human needs.” Ellis was also drawn to a theme which recurred in Hinton’s work, that many things commonly thought as evil were in fact good. As we shall see, Ellis’ own writing was inspired by an effort to show the “lowest things” of the world to be sacred.

Although unconventional in his beliefs, Ellis’ account of his conversion fits many of the themes and patterns scholars have identified in more conventional conversion narratives. Pamela Walker’s study of the Salvation Army, for example, identifies conversion narratives as some of the central texts in efforts to evangelize the working-class. These narratives often included a journey that culminated in conversion. At nineteen, Ellis was restless and uncertain about his future; he traveled to Australia, where he spent a great deal of time alone. After his conversion, Ellis claimed he was never the same again and in his journal made parallels between his years in Australia with those the apostle Paul had spent in Arabia: like Paul he had “seen & felt unspeakable things.” For Ellis (much like Paul), the result had been a vision that was applicable for every eventuality: “there is for me no more doubt.” Ellis’ conversion account also follows what Callum Brown describes as the evangelical narrative code (popularized in religious literature like Pilgrim’s Progress): Ellis recounted years of torment, doubt and frustration, followed by conversion and a sense of inner harmony. Ellis’ frequent references to his “conversion,” and the similarities between

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40 Grosskurth, 18.
41 Grosskurth, 47.
this account and other contemporary conversion narratives, reveal how he drew on the broader Christian religious culture to construct and understand his life and work.

In many ways Havelock Ellis found identity, meaning and mission while in the Australian bush – not only had he found unity in Nature and science but a few weeks after his conversion, he also read how Hinton had enrolled in medical school. In his journal Ellis wrote about the experience as follows: “I laid the book down and jumped up. I may not be fit to be a doctor, but I shall never make anything else. And then I wondered how ever it was that this had never occurred to me before. Since that evening, my opinion has not altered in the least.” The only other profession Ellis had thought of entering had been the Church and here he clearly presented his decision to become a doctor as a vocation or calling similar to the “call” to the priesthood.

Upon returning from his conversion in Australia and entering the progressive circles of London, Ellis shared his diary with the South African feminist Olive Schreiner. Before passing it on to Schreiner he reviewed its contents and was disturbed by the evidence of lingering religious belief that he had forgotten about:

I am impressed by the little traces of what seems to be like orthodoxy here and there as regards religious feeling. I was inclined at first to think that I might really have had at one time a revulsion of feeling towards orthodoxy...But on consideration I think not. It was rather that, believing that all religious forms had a core of emotional reality, I was willing to some extent to use the forms for the sake of the reality. This seems to me now a rather dangerous thing to do.

As Chris Nottingham notes, this judgment is difficult to reconcile with the hymn which appeared in a diary entry for November 10, 1879, more than a year after his “conversion”:

43 Grosskurth, 45.
44 Ibid., 25.
Thy life was given for me!  
Thy blood, O Lord was shed  
That I might ransomed be,  
And quickened from the dead.  

It puts into a new light Ellis' comment to Schreiner that the conversion was the pivot of his life: "I haven't changed since I came back from Australia. That seemed to stop my development." While Ellis presented himself as fully constructed obviously his ideas were developing in a complex system of beliefs; what is crucial here is the place that Ellis' "conversion" played in his own understanding of his life's trajectory.

Jeffrey Weeks considers Ellis' transformation to be a typical Victorian semi-religious conversion that provided him inner strength to counter the aridity of society and gave a foundation to his later philosophies. Others, like Chris Nottingham, have noticed that Ellis' conversion was so powerfully significant because it provided answers to Ellis' own pressing sexual needs and his need to make the universe more comfortable while isolated and unsuccessful in Australia. I argue that this conversion, and the importance Ellis attributed to it, was the first step in Ellis' borrowing of the respectability of priests for sexual scientists and an early example of the way he used this authority to point the way towards a "scientific religion" within a eugenic framework. As Gauri Viswanathan argues, conversion is one of the most destabilizing political events in a society as it not only alters the demographic character of a community but also challenges the accepted religious doctrines and practices. As a result, conversion can have many meanings from assimilation to dissent. From this perspective Ellis' conversion can be understood as a dissenting position within the scientific community as well as a challenge to the broader Christian culture.

46 Ibid., 19.  
47 Weeks, "Havelock Ellis and the Politics of Sex Reform," 144.  
48 Viswanathan, xi-xii.
Ellis' conversion led him to see the sacred in the "lowest things" and was part of a challenge to the accepted mores of his time. In the preface to his major work, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Ellis asked the reader to imagine how strange it would be if food and drink were treated with secrecy and spoken of only in poetic language. Then the problems of nutrition - "how often should I eat... should I eat grass?" - could not be solved. In regard to sex he hoped that "when the rigid secrecy is once swept away a sane and natural reticence becomes for the first time possible." Yet he argued that this had not always been the case:

This secrecy has not always been maintained. When the Catholic Church was at the summit of its power and influence it fully realized the magnitude of sexual problems and took an active and inquiring interest in all the details of normal and abnormal sexuality...

Ellis admired this inquiring interest as it recognized the deep importance of sexuality.

As the type of such treatises I will mention the great tome of Sanchez, *De Matrimonio*. Here you will find the whole sexual life of men and women analyzed in its relationships to sin. Everything is set forth, as clearly and as concisely as it can be - without morbid prudery on the one hand, or morbid sentimentality on the other - in the coldest scientific language; the right course of action is pointed out for all the cases that may occur, and we are told what is lawful, what a venial sin, what a mortal sin.

In this passage, Ellis highlights the need for authority, respectability and objective judgment in this endeavor, traits Ellis wanted to secure for the new sexual scientist.

It may seem surprising that Ellis, the sexual scientist, defined his forebearers as Catholic theologians and that his stated aim was to emulate the spirit of thoroughness and clarity exemplified by the medieval church as he sought to define what was normal and abnormal. This is made more understandable by Michel Foucault's work on the role of the confessional. In *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1* Foucault argued that the modern discourse of sexuality actually originated in the procedure of the confession. By

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requiring penitents to reflect on and confess not only their physical acts but, more specifically, any stirrings of desire, the Catholic Church enforced the translation of desire into words, and through these words began to alter and direct desire. According to Foucault, the "archive of the pleasures of sex" was created and then frequently disappeared from the sixteenth century onwards. It was only with the work of medicine and psychiatry that the discourse was solidified – especially through the work of eighteenth century psychiatrists who studied sexual “perversion,” including Kaan, Krafft-Ebing, Tardieu, Molle, and Havelock Ellis. Foucault applauded their seriousness in creating a “confessional science.” Like Foucault, Ellis recognized the theologians’ clinical approach to sexual matters and hoped to produce a similar structure in his own investigation of normal and abnormal sexual behaviour.

Ellis tried to borrow the authority and respectability of the theologians for sexual scientists, while avoiding their specific weakness:

> Now I do not consider that sexual matters concern the theologian alone, and I deny altogether that he is competent to deal with them. In his hands, also, undoubtedly, they sometimes become prurient, as they can scarcely fail to become in the non-natural and unwholesome basis of asceticism, and as they with difficulty become in the open-air light of science.

According to Ellis, theologians were incompetent to deal with sexual matters because of their own repressed sexual needs. For Ellis, the result of asceticism was darkness, perversion and obsession, which could only be offset by the “open-air light of science.” There are echoes here of the “fresh-air” theories that were implemented in education and slum reform at the time. This “open-air light” of science opposed the darkness of the confessional; Ellis

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imagined another Enlightenment in the realm of sexual understanding as he held up familiar ideals of rationalism, transparency and naturalness as beacons.

This is the larger context within which Ellis compared his own work to that of his Catholic predecessors:

But we are bound to recognize the thoroughness with which the Catholic theologians dealt with these matters, and from their own point of view, indeed, the entire reasonableness; we are bound to recognize the admirable spirit in which, successfully or not, they sought to approach them. We need to-day the same spirit and temper applied from a different standpoint. These things concern everyone; the study of these things concerns the physiologist, the psychologist, the moralist. We want to get into possession of the actual facts, and from the investigation of the facts we want to ascertain what is normal and what is abnormal, from the point of view of physiology and of psychology. We want to know what is naturally lawful under the various sexual chances that may befall man, not as the child born of sin, but as a naturally social animal. What is a venial sin against nature, what a mortal sin against nature?  

Simply by replacing “God” with “Nature” he could maintain the activities of collecting “confessions” and interpreting their meaning. Venial and mortal sins against nature were to be defined through rational enquiry by sexual scientists who, it is implied, were more aware of their own sexual needs than were priests. The sexual scientist, being free from the requirements of chastity, had fewer tendencies towards obsession. Ellis then went on to say why this new thoroughness and curiosity was needed:

I regard sex as the central problem of life. And now that the problem of religion has practically been settled, and that the problem of labor has at least been placed on a practical foundation, the question of sex – with the racial questions that rest on it – stands before the coming generations as the chief problem for solution. Sex lies at the root of life, and we can never learn to reverence life until we know how to understand sex. – So, at least, it seems to me.  

55 Ibid., v-vi.  
56 Ibid., vi.
This conclusion to the preface reveals Ellis' preoccupation with eugenics - the movement in Europe and the Americas that, to greater or lesser degrees supported selective reproduction, immigration restrictions and "race hygiene." In the context of Ellis' time, venial sins were understood to be light faults or errors while mortal sins were grievous and led to exclusion from heaven. Ellis saw eugenics as the best way to help sexual scientists more clearly distinguish between venial and moral sins against "Nature." Ellis wrote several essays concerning eugenics, including *The Problem of Race Regeneration* (1911), that advocated efforts to "persuade" the unfit to be sterilized as a policy for the improvement of "the race." In *The Task of Social Hygiene* (1912) Ellis argued that on discovering that "he is not justified in aiding to carry on the race, the eugenicist will be content to make himself, in the words of Jesus, 'a eunuch for the kingdom of Heaven's sake.'" Ellis took the eugenic mission seriously and assured Francis Galton in 1907 that "in the concluding volume of my 'Sex Studies' I shall do what I can to insinuate the eugenic attitude." As historian Siobhan B. Somerville argues, the beginnings of sexology were related to, and perhaps even dependent on, a pervasive climate of eugenicist and anti-miscegenation attitudes and legislation. For Ellis, eugenics provided "the race" with the means of salvation and progress. This progress was to be ushered in by "rational" sexual scientists whose objective knowledge of "Nature" could lead the way to a new Enlightenment.

In the sections on *Auto-erotism* and the accompanying "Appendix C: The Auto-erotic Factor in Religion" Havelock Ellis echoed a common theme among sexologists and

57 Grosskurth, 410.
59 Grosskurth, 410.
psychologists of his time, arguing that the so-called "spiritual" or religious impulse was a form of sexual mania:

There is certainly... good reason to think that the action and interaction between the spheres of sexual and religious emotion are very intimate. The obscure promptings of the organism at puberty frequently assume on the psychic side a wholly religious character; the activity of the religious emotions sometimes tends to pass over into the sexual region; the suppression of the sexual emotions often furnishes a powerful reservoir of energy to the religious emotions; occasionally the suppressed sexual emotions break through all obstacles.  

Ellis described a lurking danger in the power of sexual energy if it was not managed with care. Instead of advocating the suppression of sexual emotions Ellis argued for a balance of sexual expression and restraint. This restraint was to be informed by definitions of venial and mortal sins against "nature."

Ellis' writing on auto-erotism emphasized the centrality of sexual energy to well-being. He described hysteria as "sex hunger" to reinforce his assumptions about gender roles and religious excess. He used nuns as the ultimate cautionary tale about the dire consequences of suppressing "sacred" sexual energy. Ellis explained their spiritual experience as a kind of "hysteria" and asserted that masturbation (when practiced instead of sexual intercourse) was a sign of degeneracy. This was part of Ellis' mission, as defined in the preface to the Studies, to identify what was a venial and a mortal sin against nature. As a "sexual priest" of his time, he inverted the conventional morality and provided new moral guidelines influenced by his own beliefs in gender differences, eugenics and the redeeming role of motherhood.

Ellis coined the term “auto-erotism” to encompass “the phenomena of spontaneous sexual emotion generated in the absence of an external stimulus proceeding, directly or indirectly, from another person.” He hoped to reconnect masturbation to the “larger group to which it naturally belongs.” He also wanted to counter the “mischievous” discussion of the “evils of masturbation” by insisting that masturbation was a “specialized tendency which in some form or in some degree normally affects not only man, but all the higher animals.”

His saw his work as filling an important void and criticized psychiatrists, “medical and non-medical,” for their tendency to treat the manifestations of auto-erotism in a “dogmatic and off-hand manner which is far from scientific.” This resulted in “ignorance and chaotic notions among the general public” about what was normal and morally sound. He gave an example of where this ignorance could lead:

a married lady who is a leader in social-purity movements and an enthusiast for sexual chastity, discovered, through reading some pamphlet against solitary vice, that she had herself been practicing masturbation for years without knowing it. The profound anguish and hopeless despair of this woman in face of what she believed to be the moral ruin of her whole life cannot well be described.

By showing that even the most upright members of society masturbated, Ellis hoped to diminish the stigma of this sexual impulse.

In order to avoid such devastating “discoveries” the general public needed a way out of the confusion. Ellis was concerned with shifting the focus to a different kind of moral ruin

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62 Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex, 161.
63 Ibid., 163.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 164.
to challenge ignorant, "unscientific" understandings of the power of sexual energy. Ellis argued that

the conditions of modern civilization render auto-erotism a matter of increasing social significance. As our marriage-rate declines, and as illicit sexual relationships continue to be openly discouraged, it is absolutely inevitable that auto-erotic phenomena of one kind or another, not only among women but also among men, should increase among us both in amount and intensity. It becomes, therefore, a matter of some importance, both to the moralist and the physician, to investigate the psychological nature of these phenomena and to decide precisely what their attitude should be toward them.66

Ellis described auto-erotism, and especially masturbation, as expected and inevitable behaviour given the restraints in modern society. By urging further investigation into the psychological nature of auto-erotic behaviour Ellis countered the accepted values of his day; he implied that masturbation had benign or even positive outcomes. Many historians have explored the reasons masturbation became so problematic from the 1700s onwards. Thomas Laqueur, in his work *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, argues that masturbation became the focus of such intense attention because it showed the underbelly of modern Enlightenment society; masturbation, Laqueur argues, is the ultimate moral problem for the modern self.67 With the collapse of the ability of church and state authorities to monitor behavior in the 1700s, a new, private, and modern self and sexuality was born. The liberty and freedom this new social structure brought also contained the triple threat of uncontrolled imagination, secrecy and excess. Laqueur shows how the modern social contract requires a great deal of self-control, and how controlling masturbation was the ultimate psychic struggle between the self and society. In this context Havelock Ellis' more

66 Ibid.
liberal view about the rather benign nature of masturbation – when practiced in moderation by individuals of sound mental and physical health – represented a new social and moral order. Ellis proposed a moral order where some supposedly “sinful” behavior was normal, natural and by extension healthier to the individual and the state.

In the first section of *Auto-erotism* Ellis developed the foundation for his later focus on the religious factors in auto-erotism. He argued that while celibate men could experience auto-erotic dreams frequently and be considered healthy this was much more rare for women. He claimed it was unusual for women to experience auto-erotism during sleep because of the “violence with which repressed sexual emotion in women often manifests itself.” He cited a report written about the West Riding Asylum that attested to the frequency and depressing nature of erotic dreams among neurotic women. This emphasis on abnormality and neurosis emerged again in his discussion of nuns, who come to represent conventional religion, as misled and repressed women.

In writing about the “rare” and neurotic women who experienced auto-erotic emotions during sleep, Ellis medicalized and demonized women’s sexuality. These women, in Ellis’ view, were even more remarkable because they had a far greater tendency than men to feel the repercussions of dreams in waking life; women tended to confuse dreams with reality. Ellis cited a case in Australia where a man was charged with rape on the accusations of a girl who later confessed to “auto-erotic nocturnal hallucinations”; according to Ellis, these cases were not uncommon. Ellis’ understanding of women’s auto-erotic experiences discredited women’s voices. While a number of scholars have noted that Ellis recognized

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69 Ibid., 201.
women's sexual needs the cost was very high: Ellis' women gained sexual lives but lost credibility as rational agents.

Ellis built a case against women's rational capabilities, especially targeting those women who chose not to live in a marriage relationship. In his argument, women's physical and mental problems were closely tied to a lack of sexual expression. According to Ellis, hysteria was the result of "sex hunger." Ellis recognized the positive aspects of Jean-Martin Charcot's study of hysteria as a neurological disorder largely affected by hereditary factors. Charcot's work on hysteria, from 1870 onwards, established hysteria as a legitimate disorder by showing that the physical symptoms - while produced by emotions and not physical injury - were not under the conscious control of the patients. At the same time, Ellis thought Charcot's explanation unduly minimized the sexual factor in hysteria. Instead Ellis was influenced by Plato's understanding of hysteria: that it was caused when the unfruitful womb or "animal" wandered in every direction through the body. While informed by advances in anatomy, Ellis still argued that hysteria was the result of repressed physical sexual desire. As proof, Ellis pointed to the frequency of cases of hysteria within convents, providing many examples of convents as "vast theatres" of masturbation, and claiming that nuns were similar to prostitutes in their frequent use of "consolateurs." Female sexuality, isolated from heterosexual intercourse, was depicted as deviant, unstable and problematic.

Through the examples and argument Ellis employed in Appendix C - a brief section that explored the connection between intense religious belief and increased auto-erotic behaviour - he sought to discredit conventional Christianity in general and Catholicism in

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70 Ibid., 218, 232.
71 Showalter, 147.
72 Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex, 214.
73 Plato's Timaeus as quoted in Ellis, Studies in the Psychology of Sex, 210.
particular. Evangelical revivals, for example, “far from rooting out carnal sin... seem actually to stimulate, even at the present day, to increased licentiousness.”\textsuperscript{74} Similarly, Ellis quoted a psychiatrist who claimed that all nuns were in “some way or other sexually depraved.”\textsuperscript{75} In contrast, Ellis cited scholars who argued that the religious rites practiced by “early man” were intended to increase sexual energy and encourage reproduction.\textsuperscript{76} Ellis implied that this “natural” state of religion is much more healthy and moral. In his later writing Ellis argued that modern societies were in need of “a true initiation of the new-born soul at puberty into the deepest secrets of life and the highest mysteries of religion.”\textsuperscript{77} By showing the sexual perversion lurking beneath conventional religious activity Ellis hoped to encourage a return to “natural” religions that honoured the sacred sexual impulse.

Having thus set the scene Ellis dove into detailed case studies of two women’s lives, one modern and one early modern. First, Ellis summarized the case study of Thérèse M. from the clinical psychiatrist Paul Serieux’s study \textit{Recherches cliniques sur les anomalies de l’instinct sexuel}. Thérèse, at the age of 24, showed “physical stigmata of degeneration”; her father is described as feckless and her mother as having a history of mental illness. Thérèse, who was raised in an orphanage, did not conform to acceptable feminine behavior: “being a troublesome, volatile child; she treated household occupations with contempt, but was fond of study.”\textsuperscript{78} After the death of both her mother and a close mentor Thérèse sought out community within a convent. In the convent she focused on worshiping Jesus and over time her religious passions combined with sexual emotions and feelings for a priest. She was forced to leave the convent and after taking a job as a servant fell in love with her confessor.

\textsuperscript{74} Ellis, \textit{Studies in the Psychology of Sex}, 313.  
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Ibid.}, 314-15.  
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Ibid.}, 311.  
\textsuperscript{77} Havelock Ellis, \textit{The Task of Social Hygiene} (London: Constable, 1912), 237.  
\textsuperscript{78} Ellis, \textit{Studies in the Psychology of Sex}, 316.
believing it to be Jesus’ wish for her to have sexual relations with a priest. After causing a number of scandals she was admitted to a mental asylum, where she masturbated frequently and attempted to seduce doctors and eventually an employee.

Serieux assessed Thérèse M. as a sexual hysteric within the case study. We are told her recovery comes when “in a last letter Thérèse recognizes with terror the insanity to which the exaltation of her imagination had led her, ‘Now I only believe in God and in suffering; I feel that it is necessary for me to get married.’” Thérèse’s own conclusion is extremely useful to Ellis’ argument; she had loosened her ties to Catholic theology (only believing in God, with no mention of the Virgin Mary) and saw it as necessary for her mental health to have a married sexual relationship. A life of chastity, in this account, is a trap for unstable and isolated women. Thérèse’s renunciation of her vows of chastity was a sign of her maturity and health. Ellis eliminates the possibility that for this curious and intelligent young woman the prospect of domestic responsibilities, marriage and possibly motherhood would be intensely frustrating and limiting. Ellis does not consider that her hysteria had vocational hunger and not sexual hunger at its core.

The second case study that Ellis paid particular attention to was the auto-biographical account of a seventeenth-century mother superior of the Ursulines of Loudun, Soeur Jeanne des Anges. Jeanne des Anges was a famous French mystic, known for her visions and abiding faith. She experienced demonic possession that lasted for 4 years during which time

79 Ibid., 319.
80 As we have seen, Ellis was writing before the foundation of psychiatric explanations of hysteria were rocked by the First World War’s many “shell-shocked” young men who exhibited the same symptoms as hysterical women. As Elaine Showalter has shown, if epidemic female hysteria in late Victorian England had been a form of female protest against a patriarchal society that confined women to narrow definitions of femininity, then epidemic male hysteria in World War I was a protest against politicians, generals and psychiatrists who expected and enforced a heightened form of masculinity. Showalter, 172.
she was tempted by seductive demons and saw hallucinations; she resisted these demons using severe methods, such as throwing herself on burning coals and wearing a corset of spikes. She was eventually cured and her status as a holy person was elevated by her struggle. She lived the rest of her life seeing visions and giving guidance.

This case attracted a great deal of attention in its time and after. The charges made by the possessed nuns led to the trial and execution of a priest of Loudun and as such has been a focus for recent interpretations of the witch craze. As Moshe Sluhovsky highlights in his study of group possession, the case also played a major role in Enlightenment anticlericalism and in nineteenth-century positivist attacks on the alleged fanaticism and ignorance of the Catholic Church. Along the same lines, Ellis used this case to vilify religious excess. Ellis described Soeur Jeanne des Anges in very critical terms:

> clever, beautiful, ambitious, fond of pleasure, still more of power. With this, as sometimes happens, she was highly hysterical, and in the early years of her religious life was possessed by various demons of unchastity and blasphemy with whom for many years she was in constant struggle.

In this passage, Ellis conflates hysteria with possession. In merging these concepts he simplified the situation and used nineteenth century terminology to give new meaning to the nun's experience, and to make his own argument about women, religion and sexuality. As Sluhovsky argues, diagnosing the demonically possessed nuns as mentally disturbed or hysterical merely categorizes them in clinical terms that silence them and prevent further investigation. Ellis' reinterpretation of this account of possession, with links to the witch-hunt, also introduced a new threat. Instead of showing a tale of nuns who were spiritually

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83 Sluhovsky, 1388.
under siege he used the story to show that sexual energy, when denied an outlet, would "possess" women.

Ellis' ridiculed women's religious experiences and emphasized the new threat of religious excess partly in response to the growing popularity of sisterhoods during his lifetime. Susan Mumm's *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain* demonstrates the appeal of sisterhoods to women in the nineteenth century and also reminds us of the consistently critical response these women faced in their time as well as today. The growth of these Anglican sisterhoods happened rapidly in a glare of publicity. Conservative estimates calculate that between 3,000 and 4,000 women were members in 1900, but these figures leave out the ninety-plus communities that Mumm's research unearthed. She estimates that between 1845 and 1900 approximately 10,000 women passed through these communities, staying for anywhere from a few months to a lifetime. Most of the women who were drawn to the Anglo-Catholic communities came from middle or upper-class origins, seeking to live out their belief in Christian socialism, taking vows of poverty, running hostels and hospitals for sick children, providing meals and care during outbreaks of illness. Considering that class status was a frequent marker of either "degeneracy" or "fitness" – the phrase "survival of the fittest" could imply that financial success was a sign of "fitness" – it would have been upsetting to eugenicists to see such "fit" women reject their maternal responsibility to "the race." Convent life also disturbed a whole series of comfortable Victorian assumptions about the nature of gender differences, as the success of women's community implied female self-sufficiency and the dispensability (at

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least for some women) of men. Unsurprisingly, sisterhoods encountered enormous public opposition. The most virulent opposition to the sisterhoods swirled around three ideas: the fear that communities were hostile to families, the accusations of Romanism, and objections that sisterhoods worked independently of the hierarchy of the Church. By the 1890s most opposition had died down but for Ellis the popularity of sisterhoods remained a potent symbol of women choosing the wrong path for themselves and "the race."

Mumm argues that academic neglect of these women’s lives stems from the stereotypes of nuns as passive, ineffective and anachronistic, without historical importance. At the other extreme is the ongoing popular interest in nuns – from romanticized depictions of the “good sisters” to beliefs that all women of religion are psychologically abnormal, to the fascination with “convent” pornography. She shows how these assumptions are all informed by stereotypes and a complete lack of understanding for why women joined communities. We see both of these strains in Ellis’ work; he not only disparaged the lives of nuns as ineffective but he was also fascinated with the sexual side of convent life.

For Ellis these nuns represented an opposition to all that he held to be progressive and scientific. In order to understand his position it is crucial to note that while Ellis’ views on gender differences reflected many of the contemporary feminist ideas of his day, he viewed feminism primarily through the prism of maternity. In The Task of Social Hygiene (1912), for example, Ellis praised the work of German feminists because “so far from making as its ideal the imitation of men, [it] bases itself on that which most essentially marks the woman as unlike the man.” German feminists focused on “the demands of woman the mother.”

This point became increasingly important to Ellis over the course of his career. Whereas, in

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85 Ibid., 198.
86 Ellis, The Task of Social Hygiene, 95, 96.
the 1894 edition of *Man and Woman* Ellis focused narrowly on biological differences between the sexes, the 1929 edition, in contrast, mapped out a much more rigidly divided social space: “When women enter the same fields as men, on the same level and to the same degree, their organic constitution usually unfits them to achieve the same success, or they only achieve it at a greater cost. Woman’s special sphere is the bearing and rearing of children, with the care of human life in the home.”

In this context Ellis’ emphasis on sins “against nature” led him to conclude that women who chose to live outside of that “special sphere” were “unnatural” and making immoral as well as unhealthy choices.

Ellis’ criticisms of nuns also drew on other important themes in his work. His eugenic worldview strongly influenced how he labeled “normal” sexual and spiritual behaviour. After dismissing masturbation as a cause of insanity he cautiously stated that “we may reach the conclusion that in the case of moderate masturbation in healthy, well-born individuals, no seriously pernicious results necessarily follow.”

Ellis argued that the dangerous side effects of masturbation were different in men and women; for men it led to shame and withdrawal but in women it led to a boldness in temperament, sexual frigidity and mental arrogance.

For Ellis, the criterion for judging whether masturbation was “normal” or “abnormal” was whether or not it was practiced in preference to sexual relations. As a result, a nun who masturbated was, in Ellis’ view, abnormal. Finally, Ellis argued that the moral and physical health of the individual was the key to determining whether masturbation would lead to morbid conditions: “Excess may act, according to the familiar old-fashioned adage, like the lighted match. But we must always remember the obvious truth that it makes

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87 Quoted in Russett, 123-124.
a considerable difference whether you throw your lighted match into a powder magazine or into the sea." It is in this insistence on the hereditary "quality" of individuals that we hear Ellis' growing eugenic fervour.

The slippages in Ellis' argument here reveal some of his underlying assumptions. For instance if it is only those individuals who have hereditarily "morbid soils" who will tend towards excessive masturbation then why are masturbating nuns problematic, since they would not be reproducing? As well, if the consequence of excessive masturbation is to prefer it to heterosexual coitus then is not masturbation the best option for these "unfit" individuals? But Ellis was trying to show a new path, a new kind of sexual-spiritual path. As a result the nuns - his most potent symbol of excess and morbidity - are the perfect example of how not to live.

Like many of his contemporaries Havelock Ellis was a proponent of eugenics. Eugenics emerged at the turn of the twentieth century as a melding of science and social policy; Francis Galton coined the term in 1883, from the Greek root meaning "good in birth." Galton, a scientist and cousin of Charles Darwin, believed the way to improve human life was through knowledge of, and control over, human procreation: to ensure that the best - the fittest - members of the population reproduce more than the less fit. Eugenics was based on scientific racism and the idea that the reproductive capacities of the "unfit," which included the insane and the "inferior races," should be restricted. The Nazi's horrific policies and extermination camps are examples of the most extreme application of eugenics. Yet eugenics' general appeal made it popular in most European, North American and Latin

91 Ibid., 258-9.
93 Peter Wade, Race and Ethnicity in Latin America (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), 12.
American countries where the concept merged with the spread of modernization, empire and “progress.”

The eugenic progress that Ellis desired was hampered by the work of British nuns who provided charity for the weakest and most vulnerable in society. Ellis was concerned with “unchecked environmental socialism”:

enabling the weak, the incompetent, and the defective to live and to live comfortably makes it easier for those on the borderline of these classes to fall into them, and it furnishes the conditions which enable them to propagate their like.

Ellis believed charity made things worse. Ellis believed that the truly concerned citizens should be thinking long term, in “scientific” ways, about how to eliminate poverty:

The superficially sympathetic man flings a coin to the beggar; the more deeply sympathetic man builds an alms house for him so that he need no longer beg; but perhaps the most radically sympathetic of all is the man who arranges that the beggar shall not be born.

Given Ellis’ outlook his criticism of nuns is not surprising. Ellis saw the nun’s rejection of motherhood, combined with the efforts of sisterhoods in Britain to provide meals, shelter, employment and comfort to the poor as a direct obstacle to progress. By re-describing their lives as abnormal and unnatural he hoped to deliver a silencing blow.

Ellis hoped to redeem auto-erotism and transfer the stigma of perversion onto those who repressed their “sacred” sexual impulses. In the concluding chapter on auto-erotism he summarized his view that masturbation is not a threat to the eugenically “fit” who practice it in moderation:

95 Ellis, The Problem of Race Regeneration, 38.
96 Ellis, The Task of Social Hygiene, 401.
From one point of view it may be said that all auto-erotic phenomena are unnatural, since the natural aim of the sexual impulse is sexual conjunction, and all exercise of that impulse outside such conjunction is away from the end of Nature. But we do not live in a state of Nature which answers to such demands; all our life is "unnatural." 97

Ellis was willing to problematize what was seen as natural when defending the sexual impulse but did not take this further to challenge gender roles.

And as soon as we begin to restrain the free play of sexual impulse toward sexual ends, at once auto-erotic phenomena inevitably spring up on every side. There is no end to them; it is impossible to say what finest elements in art, in morals, in civilization generally, may not really be rooted in an auto-erotic impulse. "Without a certain overheating of the sexual system," said Nietzsche, "we could not have a Raphael." 98

In Ellis' estimation some "unnaturalness" was more acceptable than others. He could recognize value in male celibacy, as it often resulted in great works of art or literature, but he did not provide the same space for female expression.

By showing the pervasiveness of the sexual impulse Ellis hoped to show how foolish and potentially dangerous it was to suppress this central part of identity:

Auto-erotic phenomena are inevitable. It is our wisest course to recognize this inevitableness of sexual and transmuted sexual manifestations under the perpetual restraints of civilized life, and, while avoiding any attitude of excessive indulgence or indifference, to avoid also any attitude of excessive horror, for our horror not only leads to the facts being effectually veiled from our sight, but itself serves to manufacture artificially a greater evil than that which we seek to combat. 99

This greater evil - worse than the ignorance about sexuality that Ellis hoped to combat - was created by suppressing sexual energy entirely. Ellis thus replaced the old evil, the "solitary vice" with a new threat – religious excess. In order to establish the threat of religious excess Ellis linked Christianity to hysteria, irrationality, sexual perversion, degeneracy and death. In

Ellis' writing we see a very modern pre-occupation with the secular, rational and scientific and a vilification of the “religious.” Yet while Ellis' writing embodied these modern concerns he also claimed to search out the sacred. While Ellis was a staunch critic of conventional Christianity his own understanding of himself and his work actually remained profoundly “religious” and provides an alternative to Freud’s analysis of religion and spirituality as “arrested development.” For Ellis, both religion and masturbation were not harmful if they were practiced in moderation. Considering that Ellis viewed masturbation as safe for certain people of “hereditary quality,” it is also necessary to look at whom he considered “fit” and “unfit” in terms of their spiritual practices.

Woven into Ellis' writing on sexuality were allusions to what he considered to be acceptable spiritual experiences. Ellis' influential work Sexual Inversion (first published in 1897 and revised over several decades) was one of the earliest English texts to treat homosexuality scientifically. He included a series of case studies presented mostly in the subjects’ own words. While Ellis marginalized the “inner life” or spiritual experience of the men and women whose case studies he described – reticence possibly due to Ellis’ own disagreements with Freud’s work on dreams and fantasy – he quoted approvingly Edward Carpenter’s claim that “there really is an organic connection between the homosexual temperament and unusual psychic or divinatory powers.”

Joy Dixon’s study of theosophy in her work Divine Feminine also highlights Ellis' redefinition of spirituality as a form of auto-erotism, yet (as she notes) he gave scant comfort to those theosophists and others who

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wished to see spirituality as the highest and purist of human emotions. Ellis’s vague spiritual beliefs cannot be defined as theosophical or even occult but he clearly wanted to be remembered as, and imagined himself as, a spiritual and scientific pioneer. Many historians have simply chosen to ignore or downplay the role of spirituality in Ellis’ writing and work, thus reflecting historians’ general tendency to prioritize political or economic explanations over spiritual ones. As Dixon argues, we need to complicate our understanding of historical contexts. As part of this effort, she describes how “science and religion are not monolithic packages to be accepted or rejected. They are dense bundles of beliefs and practices that emerge in particular historical contexts.” Examining Ellis’ work is a point of entry into these tangled bundles of beliefs.

Ellis work included positive definitions of spiritual experience and varied sexual behaviour. As Chris Waters’ analysis of Freud and Ellis has demonstrated, Ellis’ term “congenital anomaly” offered an alternative to Freudian psychoanalytic descriptions of homosexuality as “arrested development.” During the inter-war years in Britain there was resistance to the Freudian view of homosexuality as a treatable and curable disease since it was perceived as a “premature arrest in sexual evolution.” Waters suggests that Ellis was appealing to a keen British distrust of theory when describing homosexuality as an inversion that was innate, hereditary and inevitable. As Ivan Crozier has argued, Ellis can be seen as doing “boundary work” in his effort to re-negotiate the ideas of Freud and position his own work as more authoritative. At the time psychoanalysis did not dominate the discourse on sexuality, and Ellis’ sex psychology sought to challenge psychoanalysis because, in his view,

103 Ibid., 12.
104 Ibid., 13.
105 Waters, 169.
it failed to describe how “normal” people behaved sexually.\textsuperscript{106} As Diana Fuss has argued, implicit in Freud’s work on sexuality is the notion that homosexuality is a regression, a “falling back” into an earlier stage of development.\textsuperscript{107} Similarly, it was Freud’s lifelong attempt to show religion as a childish thing, part of an early stage of development. Freud saw religion as a basic drive, a powerful and often sinister force that must be outgrown:

“Religion, like perversion is pre-cultural.”\textsuperscript{108} Ellis’ treatment of religious belief as a positive part of ongoing human experience thus provides an alternative to Freud’s perspective. Ellis’ positive valuation of elements of religious life and experience can also be seen in the ways Ellis borrowed the authority of priests for the sexual scientist, his emphasis on the sacred quality of the sexual impulse and the way he described his life’s work using religious themes.

In *My Life*, Ellis reflected on how he felt after finishing his life’s work, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*:

A deep, calm joy possessed me, a serene exultation. I could enter into the emotion that stirred Gibbon when he wrote the last words of his History in the summer-house at Lausanne.\textsuperscript{109}

By comparing his experience to that of Edward Gibbon, the English historian, on completing *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (volume one published 1776), Ellis elevated the importance of his work and put himself into the company of “the first modern historian,” who was known for his harsh critique of Christianity.\textsuperscript{110} Ellis continued:

I had not created a great work of art. But I had done mankind a service which mankind needed, and which, it seemed, I alone was fitted to do. I had helped

\textsuperscript{106} Crozier, 450, 464.
\textsuperscript{107} Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 57-9, 64, 77.
\textsuperscript{108} Lawton, 144.
\textsuperscript{109} Ellis, *My Life*, 432.
\textsuperscript{110} Peter Cosgrove, *Impartial Stranger: History and Intertextuality in Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Newark: Associated University Presses, 1999).
to make the world, and to make the world in the only way that it can be made, the interior way, by liberating the human spirit.\textsuperscript{111}

Ellis clearly believed he had a "calling" or "destiny" to write what he did and that his life, since his conversion in the Australian outback, was leading to this moment.

Ellis' life-long efforts to deal with the complexities of sexual experience were grounded in his own personal struggles and resonated with the needs of many readers:

The gratitude of men, and of women, has made me humble. I have sometimes felt that the taunt might be flung at me which was flung at Jesus: "He saved others, himself he could not save," Yet, I am well assured, with as little truth in the one case as in the other. For I have never sought any salvation for myself. I have been well content to be a Knight of the Holy Ghost. As I write these words, I recall that Edith's pet euphemism for the male sex organ was 'the Holy Ghost.' Well, be it so!\textsuperscript{112}

One obvious element in these words is Ellis' efforts to shock conventional sensibilities. He paralleled his own life with that of Jesus', portraying himself as a suffering servant for the truth of sexual knowledge. His use of the taunt flung at Jesus as he hung on the cross (from Matthew 27:42) emphasized the vastness of the sexual problems Ellis had only begun to define. These words also reveal his personal struggle with impotence, coming to terms with his own unusual sexual appetites and a painful marriage with many infidelities. Through his work and self-reflection, Ellis felt he was suffering for the benefit of others' eventual sexual salvation.

Ellis' reference to being a Knight of the Holy Ghost brings up themes of chivalry and sacrifice, only to be unexpectedly reconfigured to represent the penis. Considering Ellis' emphasis on the active, wooing male and the passive, receptive female perhaps this new image – the Knight of the Penis – is surprisingly apt. On the other hand, Edith's sense that

\textsuperscript{111} Ellis, \textit{My Life}, 432-433.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid.}, 433.
the penis was somehow “ghostly” creates a less robust image of the male, and Ellis, in particular. Finally, Ellis claimed:

... I have always instinctively desired to spiritualise the things that have been counted low and material, if not disgusting; and where others have seen all things secular, I have seen all things sacred."¹¹³

In this final sentence Ellis’s insistence on the priority of the sacred moved beyond irony or the desire to shock his audience. Ellis described his life and work as being deeply influenced by a search for the sacred; this was a journey to combine his scientific thoughts with his spiritual beliefs. He also set himself up as different from his contemporaries – who are these “others” who have seen all things secular? Ellis is likely writing against Freud’s psychoanalysis, with its highly secular perspective, which was overshadowing Ellis’ contributions.

Historians’ assessment of Ellis as a solely secular theorist limits our understanding of how closely scientific, sexual and spiritual knowledge(s) were interwoven at the time. Scholarly analysis has been unwilling to deal with his “conversion” as anything more than a literary construct or as a sign of agnostic leanings. As mentioned earlier, Callum Brown’s study of secularization provides a useful perspective here. Brown describes the narrative of religious decline as a story which is not simply about church decline but which is also about the end of using Christianity to construct identities and understandings of the self.¹¹⁴ He charts a short and sharp cultural revolution in the late twentieth century that makes the Britons of the year 2000 fundamentally different from those of 1950s and earlier. Obviously Brown is not arguing that all Britons before this revolution were Christian, but he is emphasizing the power of a discursive Christianity – a religious culture shaped by media –

¹¹³ Ibid.
¹¹⁴ Brown, 2.
that influenced and informed the way people understood their lives and their selves. In understanding this wider conception of religiosity – beyond church attendance – Brown uses examples of how protocols (like going to church on Sunday or saying grace before a meal) are derived from Christian expectations (through churches, clergy, the media, communities, families, or individually). The prevalence of the evangelical narrative code reveals the broader culture of religiosity. Brown argues that religious literature (beginning with the perennially popular *Pilgrim's Progress*) familiarized English-speaking people with a specifically “evangelical code” which infiltrated popular culture. The conventional life-story, including the obituary, was a specifically Christian guide to behaviour with recognizable episodes (from youth to old age, puberty to maturity), binary oppositions (good and evil, innocence and worldiness) and familiar structures (such as repentance followed by forgiveness).\footnote{Ellis, *The Story of My Life*, 69-79.}

Ellis’ frequent reference to biblical narrative in his diary, examined earlier, is surprising until it is understood in the context of this discursive Christian culture. Involved in the socialist revival of the 1880s, Ellis was a founding member of the Fellowship of the New Life, a society based on the “subordination of material things to spiritual,” which aimed at “the cultivation of a perfect character in each and all.”\footnote{Weeks, *Socialism and the New Life*, 146.} Through this society he met Edith Lees who later became his wife. Edith was a lesbian and their complicated marriage was intensified by each of their multiple affairs. Just before Edith died she ended their marriage. At the end of this difficult relationship he used an uncommon metaphor for marriage: “The path of love may have sometimes seemed to each of us the path of Calvary.
But, as all Christendom has testified the path of Calvary is not the path of failure.”

Edith had sent Havelock a poem by Emily Dickinson to convey her own dissatisfaction with the relationship and “the tests of love.” Havelock countered her assessment of the relationship – it was not a failure in his eyes, but a noble experiment. Later in his autobiography he described parts of London where he and Edith met for outings and serious discussions as “Stations of the Cross on the way to her and my Calvary.”

Finally, while reflecting on the difficult time around Edith’s death Havelock was comforted that “whatever experiences life may yet hold it is only once that love can call upon us to ascend Calvary.” This repeated metaphor for his longest relationship reveals the difficulties, sacrifices and pain involved – as well as Havelock’s sensationalistic leanings. It also implies that he saw a deeper purpose and meaning to their journey; professionally, this struggle added a passion and commitment to his work as a sexologist.

Ellis was also preoccupied with the journey of “the race” as seen in his enduring focus on eugenics and the importance of “racial hygiene.” To help understand the significance of eugenics for Ellis the history of religion opens up a way to see eugenics as religion, or a part of a philosophical whole that includes religiosity. Very useful to this undertaking is Robert Baird’s idea of a “functional definition of religion,” in his work, *Category Formation and the History of Religions*. In this formulation, religion is “ultimate concern” and “the study of religion will include the study of the ultimate concerns of peoples and communities as well as the subordinate phenomena… related to such concerns.”

In using this definition to understand eugenics, it is useful to add “the race” as a spiritual ideal

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118 Ibid., 452.
119 Ibid., 590.
along with the belief that it must be worshipped or served. In John Hedley Brooke's work on science and religion, he expands on the definition of religion to consider science as faith, and sees Darwinism as a "rival religion." This scholarship gives new meaning to the words of Francis Galton and other eugenicists who prophesied that eugenics would supplement religion and viewed it as a new "scientific religion" and "guide to morality."

Ellis' concern with eugenic themes and his sense of the need for a sexual revolution led him to focus on the need for education of the young. He favoured vigorous spiritual intervention to "guide and purify and control the physical impulses of sex which... begin to gain strength at this age." In *The Task of Social Hygiene* (1912) he wrote about the need for the churches to reconstruct themselves in order to incorporate all people: the Christians and the "337 millions of non Christians in the Empire...If they are to fulfill this duty in a wise and effectual manner they must follow the guidance of biological psychology at the point where it is at one with the teaching of their own most ancient traditions." Here Ellis' psychology of sex, which emphasized the biological approach to sex, was to be a beacon giving new direction to religious groups. Just as the preface to *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* made clear, he wanted to show what "natural" sexual behaviour was, to lead the way to a more liberal view of sexuality while giving warnings - especially along eugenic lines - about the sins against "nature." Ellis argued that if churches looked back to their most "ancient traditions" of encouraging appropriate procreation, they would see parallels with the "truth"
of eugenics. Conventional Christianity, with its focus on celibacy and suppressing the sexual impulse, had departed from religion’s most “natural” rites. In borrowing the role of “saviour” for the eugenics project he tried to harmonize this “science” with what he believed to be the most “ancient” and “natural” religious practices.

Familiar themes of female piety also appear when we look closely at how Ellis imagined “the practical realization of a sound eugenics” – “the vital problem before our civilization today” – would be carried out. For Ellis, mothers were, and always would be, the hope of the future. We have already seen his insistence on the role of motherhood for women, how he used his analysis of hysteria as “sex-hunger” and of celibacy as perversion to show motherhood as the safest, healthiest, and most “natural” option for women. Much like the “new spirit” that he had long been fascinated with, the “New Mother” was held up as the herald of a new age:

> the new mother, as I have from time to time seen her, neither shrinks in alarm from the subject of sex, nor attempts any feat of ‘sexual enlightenment’ with her children. She has no need to. She regards motherhood as a relationship of loving and natural intimacy, and she differs from any ordinary affectionate mother of old mainly by being guided by intelligence, and not by obedience to outworn traditions.

The “new mother” embodied moderation and avoided the extremes of panic or prurience that Ellis himself tried to challenge. The “new mother” was rational while still embodying the role of female piety. The potent motif of female piety, so central to the discursive Christianity of the 1800s to 1950s that Callum Brown examines, was reworked in Ellis’ hands; the “new woman’s” piety was seen in her role as guardian of eugenic imperatives and the means by which eugenic truths were to be passed on to the next generation. By keeping

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126 Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, 78.
to these familiar themes, and by not dismantling the existing gender roles, Ellis showed his own adherence to the religious discourse of his time.

Moderation is the key theme in Ellis’ views on both masturbation and spiritual experience. We have seen Ellis’s warnings of excessive masturbation, especially for those whose hereditary makeup was suspect. In much the same way Ellis supported a kind of religious experience that avoided the extreme of celibacy and orthodoxy, yet he left room for spiritual experience in the lives of the educated, white, middle-class. He implied that education would lead to a moderate kind of religious belief, to doubt and rejection of the orthodoxy that made religious excess so dangerous.

However disturbing Ellis’ assessment of the value of religion his implementation of eugenic ideals provided an alternative to Freudian psychoanalysis’ views of both sexuality and religion. Because Ellis saw in moderate religious rites the ability to improve “the race” he can be seen as challenging Freud’s notion of religion belief as equivalent to a stage of childhood or as “arrested development.” In this sense Ellis’ work is important as we explore the ways Freudian ideas have influenced academic inquiry, supporting a prejudice that religious belief or spiritual experience is a sign of weakness, irrationality or both. While acknowledging the real challenges of discussing issues of faith within the confines of historical scholarship, this analysis of how Ellis positioned himself as a “seeker of the sacred” within the science of sexology aims to show the blurring of boundaries that existed within a “secular” field.

Analysis of Ellis’ writing reveals the transition from “priest to scientist” which Mosse described to be far more complicated than historians of sexuality have so far suggested. Ellis’ precocious tendency as a young boy to deliver sermons to his sisters was reworked in
his lifelong attempt to make the sexual scientist into a new kind of priest. To do this Ellis 
borrowed the respectability and authority of priests for the new sexual scientist, and used the 
status of the “sacred” to represent and rehabilitate the sexual impulse. Throughout his 
writing the role of “saviour” was filled by the eugenics project. To justify these views Ellis 
vilified women’s sexuality as being more prone to perversion than men’s. He saw women’s 
sexuality as especially dangerous when these women did not conform to existing gender 
norms. Ellis also disparaged religious excess as a sign of degeneracy, using it as a foil for 
his supposedly more rational “scientific religion” of eugenics. Havelock Ellis provides an 
entry point into the complicated interactions between science and religion around issues of 
sexuality, gender and race. Academics must analyze these connections more closely in order 
to gain deeper understanding into the conflicts arising today around sex education in schools, 
gay rights, the labeling of “religious fanatics” and “terrorists,” and international responses to 
HIV/AIDS in Africa.
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**Unpublished paper**