



Sacred Porn Stars Online: The sometimes-unwelcome reminder of the holiness of ordinary people

Online pornography is pervasive and prolific, leading many Christians to feel ill-equipped to articulate a robust and compelling counter-narrative to that of the pornographers, writes the Ven. Sophie Relf-Christopher

There is nothing wrong with human bodies, desire, or sexual expression. The commodification of human sexuality in the post-modern marketplace, however, is deeply problematic. This is not because bodies, sexuality or sexual expression are ungodly, but because the human subject of the content, has an immense innate worth.

Let's get a sense of the scale of the online pornography market in 2023.

Pornhub is just one of the most prolific adult websites, but it averages over 100 billion video views a year. That's about 12.5 porn videos per person on earth per month! And then consider only a little over half the world's population is estimated to have internet access. There are 20 million registered Pornhub users.

The problem with pornography is not the porn-stars, who are intrinsically valuable and who are part of God's divine outworking.

The problem is the industry's objectification of humans, where interest in the actors' humanity and concern about their victimisation, are discarded for the sake of satisfying the market.

The online porn industry ignores the rampant abuses that it enables. It encourages, trades in, and profits from such abuses, because it does not prioritise the lives of the human stars in pornographic productions.

Content on porn sites incorporates significant material that is the result of coercion, violence, and exploitation; both on and off camera.

This is an economic reality that is underpinned by evident negative assumptions about the value of porn-actors, and about the use and abuse of the economically vulnerable.

Online pornography has presented Christians with new challenges and invited new questions, stemming from both concerns about the outcomes of pornography, and the lives of those witting and unwitting content providers.

Markets that trade on the vulnerability of the content producers of their core product, vigorously defend their right to trade unimpeded.

To deflect criticism from their business, Pornhub has characterised the campaign against them as originating from Christian conservative sources and conflates arguments against their business model with those against women's rights and LGBTQ rights.

For many Christians, this is just simply not our problem with the content.

It is not surprising that the most articulate proponents of online pornography dress their ideas up in the clothing of the postmodern darling, neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism is highly critiqued by liberation and political theologians due to its priority of profit over people, and the global exploitation it enables.

The commodification of human beings highlights a deep problem with the system of global markets, and the neoliberal agenda, which is innately amoral at best.

Christian perspectives are diverse

Christians are portrayed as a morally homogenous group.

This oversimplification suits pornographers, since it is easy to dismiss Christian commentators as wowers who hold arcane, unrealistic, and unhealthy views of human relations in the postmodern era.

Such suspicions assert that Christian opposition is rooted in an understanding of the baseness of all but the most vanilla of human desires, and in the most white bread of circumstances.

However, many Christians, indeed from across the breadth of our own Diocese, for example, are deeply concerned with the power imbalance both in the production phase of pornography and are alarmed by the outcomes for 'porn stars' rather than the concept of its production or the desires it supplies.

I am grateful for the discussion with Amanda Brohier, a laywoman from Holy Trinity, who shares my own deep concerns for the rights of women in the marketplace of human bodies – disassociated from their humanity. Amanda and I are both concerned for the real-world implications of this online behaviour too, and troubled for those who are at the coalface of physical interactions with people who have been groomed by violent and misogynist content. Representation of abuse of women, for example, can metastasise in subsequent real-world encounters, which of course can involve abhorrent treatment of local prostitutes. This is of course a problem for Christians, because we know that prostitutes are innately worthy of respect and dignity and are loved by God.

Broadly speaking, some Christians and scholars are attracted to the potential of pornography to provide cultural and sexual expression, however many others note that that industry promotes patterns of sexual violence, domination of abuse of women and children.

While feigned naivety about a range of Christian objections to online pornography may help multinational companies run effective PR campaigns, they do nothing to genuinely unpack some of the very legitimate questions that are posed by some Christians who care about the innate worth of both the content-producers and content-consumers, most especially when they are children.

When Pornhub took basic steps to attempt to limit child exploitation material the Pornhub community users appeared callously indifferent to the aims of the new rules to protect the most vulnerable, as the comments inset here typify.



The online environment strips the willing and unwilling, knowing, and unknowing content creators of

almost any privacy or protection while keeping the gazing eyeballs of the consumer squarely in the shadows

In their own rhetoric, these sites purport to hold both sexual expression and the content producers in high esteem.

However, their actions show contempt for the lives of those from whom they take a pimps cut, and whom they show only limited interest in protecting from exploitation, including minors.

The industry paints Christian objections to their business models as anti “content-creators”. Sites make a show of publicly batting away criticism from the performers, which was in fact always intended for the companies themselves.

The online pornography industry is not capable of providing satisfactory answers to questions asked of it by people who prioritise the human worth of those who are portrayed in the online content, as the amorality of its userbase testifies.

The pornography industry does not believe it’s witting and unwitting “content-creators” are innately valuable people beyond their monetary worth. Much less that their ordinary lives are locations of the unfolding wisdom of the divine. The problem with online pornography is not the depravity of the ordinary lives of the poor, it is the wickedness of the systems that keep them disenfranchised and routinely exploited for the delight of the powerful.

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