

# **Let's Talk about Celibacy! How Western Christian Culture Affects the Construction of Sex, Body, and Gender in Popular and Scholarly Discourses**

Stefanie Knauss

The periodical or permanent abstinence from sexual activity is a cultural and religious practice that can be found across historical and cultural contexts. Contemporary religious and non-religious discourses in the western context promote celibacy in consciously secular terms as a hip and even sexy lifestyle choice of the career-conscious and self-determined modern woman and man and idealize it as a possibility – especially for women – to find freedom, energy and subjecthood. At first sight, this seems far removed from the traditional Christian understanding of celibacy as an exercise of discipline over an unruly body that brings the believer closer to God, or the more secular view of celibacy as a rather sad sign that something is wrong with the celibate person. While I consider the oft-stated intention to develop a positive understanding of celibacy and to broaden the notion of sexuality to include celibacy as a form of sexuality in its own right a positive and important contribution of celibacy discourses at this moment, my analysis of popular and scholarly discourses about celibacy also highlights problematic aspects that counteract these attempts. As I will argue in this contribution from the perspective of Christian feminist theology, the apparently fundamental transformation in the understanding of celibacy from a repressive to an emancipatory practice has changed little in how discourses construct worldviews, social realities and identities, in particular with regard to sex, body and gender.