

www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/chi-100917christine-odonnell-sex-comments,0,2642509.story

chicagotribune.com

Hot-button political issue: Solo sex

By Rex W. Huppke

Tribune staff reporter

10:28 AM CDT, September 17, 2010

Suddenly, it's an intriguing time to disapprove of masturbation.

advertisement

In one of the stranger twists of the political season, comments made more than a decade ago by Christine O'Donnell, the Tea Party candidate who shook the political world earlier this week by winning the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate in Delaware, have turned masturbation into a campaign issue bound to divide voters, enthrall the immature and offend the prudish.

In a 1996 interview on MTV, O'Donnell, then head of an abstinence group called the Savior's Alliance for Lifting the Truth, said: "The Bible says that lust in your heart is committing adultery. So you can't masturbate without lust."

Whether O'Donnell still holds that view today is unclear. The candidate said Thursday that she made her comments when she was "in my 20s and very excited and passionate about my newfound faith."

She also said her "personal beliefs" would not affect her policy decisions as a senator.

O'Donnell's youthful comments swiftly earned her the title of "the anti-masturbation candidate," and a good bit of mockery.

Stephen Colbert, on "The Colbert Report," suggested that masturbation enthusiasts should marry their hands, while film critic Roger Ebert sent the following tweet: "If Christine O'Donnell is correct and masturbation equals adultery, who is the plaintiff?"

Dennis Martin, a theology professor at Loyola University, said widespread ridicule of O'Donnell's stance shows how dramatically the country's views on sexuality have changed.

"She is articulating a position that is a characteristic of Christianity, that was characteristic of practically everyone until a few decades ago," Martin said. "The fact that most people think it's a laughable position, that's a relatively new view."

Furthermore, Martin said, it's unfair to characterize O'Donnell's viewpoint as extreme.

"From a Catholic perspective, masturbation is a violation of the spousal love," he said. "It really makes sense that marriage is for two people and sex is something that is part of a deep intimate bond between two people, and it's also procreative. And masturbation goes against both those things."

O'Donnell, in an interview with David Weigel of Slate before the primary election, pointed out the risk her opponent, Mike Castle, faced in bringing up her pro-abstinence message: "That's a good way of insulting his Christian base, don't you think?"

Indeed, in 1975, Pope Paul VI wrote of masturbation: "Even if it cannot be proved that Scripture condemns this sin by name, the tradition of the Church has rightly understood it to be condemned in the New Testament when the latter speaks of 'impurity,' 'unchasteness' and other vices contrary to chastity and continence."

In the secular world, however, this solo sex act is met with considerably less derision.

Richard Carroll, director of the Sex and Marital Therapy Program at the Northwestern Medical Faculty Foundation, said, presumably to the delight of many, "Masturbation is normal."

"It's a perfectly normal human sexual behavior," he said. "Surveys show that two-thirds of men regularly masturbate, and about 60 percent of women regularly masturbate as well. Plenty of people use masturbation as an entirely appropriate sexual outlet."

He said he frequently counsels people who have been made to feel ashamed of their sexual impulses.

"Anyone who's trying to turn normal, healthy sexual behavior into a pathology or a sin, that doesn't serve society very well," Carroll said. "It might further their political aims, but it certainly doesn't help individuals."

Still, it's a dicey topic. In 1994, Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders suggested that masturbation be taught as a means of preventing riskier sexual activity. She was forced to resign later that year.

Craig Gross, pastor of XXXchurch, an online ministry that deals with pornography and sexual addiction, was talking masturbation earlier this week with legendary porn star Ron Jeremy at a debate at Sonoma State University in California.

"It's just so foreign to people to hear, 'Hey, don't masturbate,'" Gross said. "But if you have lust in your eyes, you've committed adultery in your heart."

To encourage people to talk about "the 'M' word," Gross started "Operation: Save the Kittens," encouraging his followers to spread the word that, "Every time you masturbate – God kills a kitten!"

The XXXchurch Web site poses the question, "Does God really kill kittens?" The answer: "You would have to talk to Bible scholars about that, but we don't think he does. It's just a great way to think about this issue in a non-threatening way."

Non-threatening unless, of course, you're a kitten. Or a person who masturbates.

rhuppke@tribune.com

Copyright © 2010, [Chicago Tribune](#)