

Shedding Light on Amsterdam's Red Light District:
A History and a Christian Response

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Girl in the Red Light District

You seem to be trapped inside your own frame, darling.
Like Rembrandt, who turned all of his paintings into self-portraits,
You can't quite separate yourself from the art you're selling.
All of us artists are that way.
We create to give a home to who we are.
And to be appreciated.

You're the art and the artist all at once, darling,
Like a student, who spends his nights pressing printed pages into his moldable mind,
You've been crafting yourself into something spectacular.
And God, you're gorgeous,
Worth infinitely more than what they pay you.
And what they pay you for.

You made yourself, darling, but not all by yourself.
Like a chef, whose taste buds understand the intricacy of every spice,
You use your God-given talents to fill your days, to fill customers.
And when you go home at the end of the workday,
You use the same God-given talents to fill your loved ones.
And a sense of purpose is knit into it.

You, darling, are confident in your art.
Like a businessman who stays long after all his coworkers have clocked out,
You make yourself more vulnerable the harder you work.
Unsure of whether the extra will pay off, you press on regardless
To strengthen the name you've already made for yourself.
And skillfully learn to perfect the system's rhythms.

You seem to be trapped inside your own frame, darling.
And as I stand on the brick street below,
And as you're perched in your window,
I hope you realize the limitations of the frame you've chosen.
I hope you know that the art behind the glass is worth appreciating,
And I hope you find the type of frame that deserves it.

It was a Thursday afternoon, not necessarily a time associated with promiscuity or end-of-the-week rebellion. And I was only there for a matter of minutes, not nearly enough time to claim a personal understanding of the area. Nonetheless, my short walk through Amsterdam's Red Light District was a direct encounter with extreme brokenness, and that brokenness broke my heart.

The Red Light District spans the length of a neighborhood in one of the oldest and most well known parts of the city, trickling out into alleyways lining a picturesque Dutch canal. It's the quintessential example of the carefree attitude towards bodily pleasures that the Dutch are known for, and it leaves nothing to the imagination. As I passed through, I wasn't quite sure where to let my eyes linger, as a fierce conflict was raging between my morality and my curious desire to understand a culture different from my own. The streets were lined with explicit posters, with colorful dildos hanging from awnings, with souvenir shops selling specialty condoms and boob-shaped mugs. Advertisements for peep shows, other erotic live theatre, and DVD porn were prevalent. I passed a number of sex museums and accompanying gift shops selling all varieties of sex toys and lingerie. One of these museums had steps leading up to a replica of a prostitute's window, where visitors could have their photo taken and experience a few minutes in a prostitute's environment. I was grateful that my eyes sometimes involuntarily shifted towards the ground, as I needed to play hopscotch to avoid puddles of vomit outside lavish bars and coffee shops – which sell cannabis, not coffee. All the colors and lights and smells and images and music overwhelmed me, and I wasn't even there at night, when the dark and the large crowds would heighten the sensation.

As my eyes continued to roam, I made eye contact with a few girls standing in ground level windows. These women were wearing only enough fabric to cover absolutely essential

body parts (like nipples, not entire breasts), and they were posing provocatively. To these women, passers-by are potential customers that need to be enticed. Most of these potential customers gaze up into these windows and view these girls as items to be purchased, since that's what the girls portray themselves as. If these customers want what the girls are advertising, they knock on the window, the girl opens her glass door, and the man enters before the girl closes her curtains (Verhoeven 149).

Window prostitution is a trend unique to Amsterdam's Red Light District, and this trend has grown into an iconic aspect of Dutch tourism because prostitution has always been legal in the Netherlands. However, it's important to note that, though window prostitution is uniquely Dutch, Red Light Districts themselves are found all over the world. Japan and other part of Southeast Asia also have sets of Red Light Districts. In these countries, prostitution is generally illegal, but tolerated because justice systems are weak. However, Montreal boasts a thriving, legal Red Light District, and parts of the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Sweden, Belgium, Germany, Austria, Mexico, and even the United States – specifically Nevada – have legalized private prostitution ("100 Countries").

Nonetheless, because Amsterdam's Red Light District is so emblematic, sexwork – including escorting, home prostitution, hotel prostitution, prostitution and stripping in sex clubs, street prostitution, massage parlors, webcams, pornography, and phone sex – in the Netherlands is a unique phenomenon ("Right to be PROUD"). Private prostitution has always been considered a legal, legitimate job that operates under normal labor laws. All self-employed prostitutes must be at least twenty-one years old, and they must register with the government to receive a prostitution permit before beginning business. These women also have the option to join PROUD, the national prostitute's union. In 1999, there were an estimated 25,000 prostitutes

in the Netherlands. The number is believed to have declined, and an estimated 2,000 prostitutes engage in window services daily, though no conclusive studies have been conducted recently ("Prostitution in the Netherlands").

Additionally, police estimate that at least half of prostitutes operating in the Netherlands are not Dutch citizens, but have immigrated from Eastern Europe or South America to work in the Red Light District ("Prostitution in the Netherlands."). In fact, the Red Light District in Amsterdam wasn't popularized as a tourist attraction until the mid 1960's and 70's, when an influx of prostitutes from South America, the Caribbean, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Southeast Asia entered the industry. With all these new workers, the district grew rapidly and quickly became a defining factor of Dutch tourism (Bovenkerk 192).

The District further boomed in 2000 when the Dutch government lifted the 1911 ban on brothels and pimps. Most brothels don't function as employers, forcing their girls to sign contracts or pass all their earnings on to their pimp. Rather, brothels primarily provide advertising services to essentially self-employed prostitutes. For example, brothels will sometimes run websites featuring johns' stories, reviews, and recommendations in an effort to make their girls' names, prices, and abilities better known. In 2011, the most popular of these websites had 50,000 users every year, 20,000 of which were active writers (Bovenkerk 194). Like individual prostitutes, all brothels are required to register with the government, and they're subject to random inspection so that police may look for any signs of human trafficking or abuse, as trafficking and violence are still outlawed ("Prostitution in the Netherlands").

The line between legal pimping and illegal human trafficking is a fine one, though. In turn, significant amounts of human trafficking still occur because law enforcement officers are unable to trace it (Bovenkerk 186). This difficulty has only been heightened since pimps have

developed the loverboy method. Loverboys are essentially pimps that start out by pretending to be girls' boyfriends and eventually become their bosses. These boys find girls with low self esteem, girls who, in the words of a convicted loverboy, "are on the stupid side. Really not much more than a body" (Bovenkerk 196). The loverboys then enter into a dating relationship with these girls, causing the girls to be socially, emotionally, and financially dependent on their so-called boyfriends, all the while convincing the girls that they love them. After the girls are deeply involved in these relationships, loverboys use a number of methods to get the girls to sell their bodies. Sometimes, the boys will take the girl's passport and personal belongings until she agrees to prostitute herself and share her earnings (Heemskerk,). Sometimes the boys threaten to break up with the girl if she doesn't start contributing financially, or they threaten physical violence. Additionally, many of these girls have their boyfriend's name tattooed somewhere prominent on their body. The girls got the tattoo as an act of love, but the loverboy now sees it as a brand; he'll be able to track and identify his girl based on a specific physical description should she try to escape (Bovenkerk 193).

Sometimes these girls recognize their relationships as abusive and seek help from the authorities. Those cases are very rare, though. More often than not, these victims are so psychologically confused that either they blame themselves for their situation, as they entered into this relationship willingly, or they truly believe these boys love them and that their relationship is an sample of what love looks like. For example, in 1995 after a group of loverboys was arrested in Utrecht, a group of prostitutes protested outside the police station for hours, bearing posters and chanting, "Let our boyfriends go" (Bovenkerk 188).

Even if officials are able to identify and punish loverboys, because their girls genuinely believe that these boys have their best interests in mind, they don't believe that they're victims of

human trafficking and, in turn, won't testify in court or receive help. Law professors Frank Bovenkerk and Marion van San had some of their students interview peers that were working in the Red Light District for a study on the loverboy method. One of these girls, who was currently engaged in forced prostitution, described her story in these words:

In the beginning I was very unsure about myself and my body. I thought I was horribly fat. My parents took me to a clinic for anorexia patients. Every Friday we could go home, and there would be a couple of guys at the bus stop. One guy from a Moroccan family came up to me and asked, surprised, 'What are you doing here? A gorgeous girl like you, with such a gorgeous figure, waiting all alone at the bus stop?' I felt flattered. His attention was totally focused on me and me alone. He was there again a couple of weeks later. With a little box and a gold ring in it. For me... But I am not a victim of a loverboy. My boyfriend loves me a lot! (195).

Thus, the loverboy method ultimately results in a strange, unhealthy relationship between loverboys and their girlfriends/employees, who have been manipulated not only into selling their bodies, but into believing that they are in control of their lives when, in actuality, the loverboys have all the power.

Though some women are manipulated into the industry, some do enter because they want to, because it's profitable and offers a lot of working freedom. Felicia Anna, a 29-year-old Romanian prostitute who has been working in the Red Light District for six years, is a perfect example. Felicia has become an outspoken member for PROUD and has been recording her prostitution experience on a well-read blog for two years. In one 2014 blog update, she writes, "I wanted to work in prostitution. Not because some guy told me something different, and not

because he made me fall in love with him and emotionally forced me into this job. No, I simply wanted to come here to do this job, to make a lot of money.” And Felicia Anna has done just that. She claims that she makes ten times more than the average person, as many women in Eastern European countries will likely make only 150-200 euros per month, which Felicia Anna can make in a single hour with a single client.

All prostitutes charge a 50-euro entrance fee, a government-mandated amount instituted to ensure that girls won’t be forced to compete with each other, thereby driving prices down and selling themselves for hardly any income. Beyond the initial entrance fee, each individual prostitute gets to decide how much she’ll charge for additional favors. She’s able to barter with individual johns, and she has the ability to deny services to johns who refuse to pay the negotiated price. Occasionally these conversations happen behind the window before the process begins, but usually, these conversations happen in the street before the john even enters, as the prostitute has more leverage this way. She doesn’t have to let in every interested john. She’s self-employed, and she can pick and choose whom she wants to provide for (Anna, Felicia).

Others also enter prostitution for the financial benefits, but not in freedom or of their own accord. Toos Heemskerk, a Dutch Christian who oversees the Scarlet Cord’s Not For Sale campaign in Amsterdam, has spent years listening to women’s stories. She testifies that many women from Eastern Europe – primarily Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary – started moving to Amsterdam in 2000, when the Dutch allowed all European Union citizens to legally work in Dutch brothels. More often than not, these women took loans from wealthy men in their home countries in an effort to climb out of poverty. After using up the loan, though, these women found themselves unable to pay their loaners back because of high interest rates. The wealthy loaners then abused their newfound leverage, sending these women to Amsterdam to earn

money, knowing that it wouldn't be possible for these women to earn enough money to repay their debt, nor would it be possible for these women to leave Amsterdam once ingrained in the sexwork system. Even if these women were able to escape home to Eastern Europe, their safety would still be threatened either by those initial loaners or their new pimps, both of whom would have equal leverage over these girls lives. However, these women can't share their stories with legal authorities in Amsterdam because they have no proof of abuse due to the loverboy tactic, nor can they share their stories with legal authorities in Eastern Europe because prostitution is criminalized there. Felicia Anna, speaking about some of her fellow Romanian prostitutes, wrote, "This could result in some cases being arrested when we go home, but this could also lead to other physical harm. Not everyone accepts prostitution as a job, and there have been examples... of women who have been beaten, even killed because other people found out they were working as prostitutes elsewhere." Knowing that greater danger awaits them at home, these girls remain in the District because it is the lesser of the two evils.

Even stories about what happens when the curtain windows close vary from prostitute from prostitute, from john to john. According to Felicia Anna, "Human trafficking is much broader than just forced prostitution, and even if women are forced into prostitution, it doesn't mean they get raped. Not every client that comes in wants to have sex." Sometimes, the johns aren't asking for full sex – or aren't capable of full sex because they're too intoxicated. Felicia Anna says that, just as often as she has sex with a john, she gives a handjob, or a blowjob, or satisfies some other peculiar fetish. Felicia Anna says that she and her other PROUD members sometimes play the role of counselor and merely talk to paying men, as one of the primary reasons men seek out prostitutes is neglect from their significant others.

So is the industry as bad as its rumored to be? Are cases of abuse rampant? Are these women working in the industry by choice, or by force? The answers are far from simple. Often, nobody is holding a gun to these girls' heads or physically forcing them to remain in the industry. But even if nobody is keeping these girls under lock and key, perhaps a lack of other options, perhaps a sense of belonging and having a name for oneself keeps these girls in their current situation against their underlying will.

And if the answers to these questions are complex, the solutions to the overarching problem are even more so. Eliminating the Red Light District entirely isn't a good solution because not everything the Red Light District offers is negative. Most notably, the Red Light District normalizes sex and makes it a part of everyday conversation. Many see this development as a positive cultural advance, as stripping a subject of its taboo nature decreases risk for hidden struggles, secret addictions, and public shaming when privatized issues are brought to light.

For example, much of America's sexual brokenness and much of the American porn industry results from the taboo nature of asking sex-related questions. For this reason, Fight the New Drug, an American organization specifically developed to raise awareness about the harmful effects of pornography, aims first and foremost to spark conversation. Supporters of FTND purchase FTND merchandise such as buttons, bags, posters, pamphlets, and, most popularly, t-shirts sporting the phrase "Porn Kills Love." Others will read the blatant phrases FTND supporters are boasting, and because the claims are so controversial, they will likely ask about the meaning behind the merchandise. Then, a door has been opened to share stories. Whether one has limited experience with pornography and simply wants more information, or whether one is fighting a deep-seeded battle with addiction, fighters are equipped by FTND to offer scientific facts about the harmful effects of pornography, to non-judgmentally answer

questions for anyone with concerns, and to point those who want help to FTND's Fortify program, which walks porn addicts through a healing process ("Get Involved"). The merchandise is simply a conversation starter that enables people to love other people in their hurt.

Though all of the after-care is an important aspect of FTND's social change agenda, the primary benefit of their work is the normalization of talk about porn culture. Many porn addicts stories start out with innocent curiosity. Young children – on average eight-years-old – are curious about how sex works, and too afraid to ask their parents because of the shame surrounding sex in American culture, they ask Google instead. That's often where addiction starts in the States, and it's absolutely heartbreaking that an innocent desire for understanding of a natural process can become an all-consuming form of self-destruction simply because Americans have grown fearfully of talking about sexuality (Larson). Generally, this same problem doesn't exist in Dutch culture, where sexuality is celebrated rather than condemned. Perhaps sex-talk isn't entirely negative, and perhaps American culture could learn something from our Dutch friends' unique approach to stigmatized vices.

Nonetheless, the Dutch themselves recognize that they exist on the far end of the social stigma spectrum. They acknowledge that this extreme leaning keeps prostitution from going underground, enabling the police to enforce policies because the industry exists in the recognized realm. However, the Dutch also acknowledge that this extreme leaning doesn't come without risks, and they've taken action to control those risks. In 2007, the Dutch government initiated Project 1012, named after Amsterdam's postal code. Through Project 1012, authorities are attempting to retain Amsterdam's unique anything-goes character while still cleaning up aspects of Amsterdam's idiosyncrasies that have deteriorated into complex crime. Many of Project 1012's goals have a local, individualized focus on specific businesses. Generally, though, the

project involves closing down some brothels, coffee shops, and bars that operate far from the limits of the Red Light District, thereby concentrating legalized pleasures that tend to be associated with crime. Authorities also plan to put heavier regulations on the businesses allowed to remain open (“Under Construction”). Thus, officials hope to be able to better enforce legal policies without outlawing Amsterdam’s iconic activities altogether.

Though Project 1012 has been at play for nearly ten years, nothing much has been achieved, largely due to efforts of PROUD prostitutes. Most prostitutes believe that, though Project 1012 is well intentioned, it is hurting individual prostitutes both by putting them out of business and by stigmatizing their career choice. For example, when the Dutch police closed 18 windows in the Red Light District in 2015, they deprived dozens of women of working space and left them penniless with nowhere to go for support. These women rely on prostituting themselves in those windows to sustain themselves financially, and the government essentially fired women who don’t have the skills, the desire, or the opportunity to seek another job. If these women are from Eastern Europe, they’re in Amsterdam with a license specifically for prostitution. If they can’t find work, then they’re forced to return to their home countries, which aren’t safe. Thus, the government was perhaps doing more harm than good in shutting down so many windows. In response, over 200 PROUD prostitutes protested in a march through the Red Light District, bearing a petition against Project 1012 signed by 414 window prostitutes (“The Right to be PROUD”).

Additionally, Dutch lawmakers recently passed a new policy that enabled prosecution of a john who accepts services from someone who has been trafficked. PROUD members then spoke out, arguing that this act will scare johns away from all transactions, thereby hurting legal sexworkers more than helping trafficking victims. Most prostitutes don’t deny that human

trafficking is a legitimate issue that needs legal attention, but many prostitutes are critical of the government's means of investigation. In fact, Felicia Anna writes, "Prostitutes want to fight human trafficking just as much as everyone else wants, but it works better to work together. The police should see us as an ally in the fight of human trafficking, instead of a victim." In her opinion, stigmatizing all prostitutes for the sake of the minority who are there against their will isn't a proper use of the government's power.

In turn, PROUD holds that stigmatization of Red Light District prostitutes is just as pressing, just as widespread of a problem as human trafficking in the Red Light District. Felicia Anna is particularly active about speaking out against the stigma surrounding prostitutes:

It's not the job so much that makes prostitutes feel bad, it's the way people talk about them, treat them, deny them and condemn them that makes us feel bad...

People who claim prostitutes do their jobs against their will, because they're either forced by a pimp, or forced by their financial situation are just people trying to scare you. How many people in this world are forced by their financial situation to do their job? Well, everyone actually. Since it doesn't matter which job you do, every job you do you only do because you need money. Some people might love their job, but many people in this world, simply do this job because it pays bills.

Though they don't comprehend the difference between their situation and anyone else's, many prostitutes are too afraid to tell their extended families and friends about their chosen profession for fear of being looked down upon or disowned. Despite the fact that prostitutes are legal, working, independent women, many prostitutes live without the general social security that other legal, working, independent woman enjoy.

PROUD has instituted a number of annual events to fight this stigmatization, most notably Paid Love Day on February 15th. To celebrate, PROUD members travel around the country on a bus and educate townspeople about the legitimacy of sexwork through demonstrations complete with speeches, chants, posters, costumes, question-answer sessions, etc. (“The Right to be PROUD”). Though Paid Love Day has done much to improve sexwork’s reputation, prostitutes need others on their side, most notably Dutch legal authorities, to substantially alter predispositions.

This truth puts legal authorities in a difficult position, as they are responsible to give a voice to the voiceless. And in this case, both trafficked prostitutes and legal prostitutes are lacking voices in the Dutch community. When operating within the parameters of legalized prostitution, especially legalized prostitution on such a large scale as Amsterdam’s Red Light District, it seems impossible to assure everyone’s wellbeing. Clearly, this is a messy issue, one that affects everyone involved in both beneficial and adverse ways. The problem is complex, and solutions aren’t easy to come by. So how should Christians respond? And how are Christians responding?

After my few minutes in the Red Light District, as I emerged and stepped back into the open space surrounding the canals, I passed a street evangelist who had strategically placed herself on that corner to encounter people exiting and entering the red-glowing alleyways. She wasn’t chanting for people to repent or turn from their life of debauchery, as might have been expected. Instead, she was telling people that they’re not forgotten, that Jesus knows their name. She started with love, just as Christians should when appropriately responding to the Red Light District and its consequent cultural mindset.

The Scarlet Cord is one example of a Christian organization approaching victims of human trafficking in love. Specifically in the Netherlands, the Scarlet Cord has put together a prevention program aimed at teenage girls. Over 45 secondary schools throughout the nation have integrated the program into their curriculum, educating girls to the dangers and methods of loverboys. Primarily, though, this program hopes to nip trafficking in the bud by encouraging self-esteem, self-respect, and healthy romantic relationships in a culture where such values aren't as popular as promiscuity ("Scarlet Cord: Netherlands").

Additionally, the Scarlet Cord has been fundraising and supporting Christians already on the ground in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East since 1978 ("Scarlet Cord"). These Christians personally know women and children being sexually exploited in these areas. They have taken the time to listen to individual stories and, in turn, are best equipped to rescue these specific people because they understand the primary cause of slavery in their specific area. As discussed previously, no two slaves have the same story. In turn, individualized attention is the best way to bless those hurt by the prostitution industry.

The Scarlet Cord also trains social workers to partner with these missionaries to aid with counseling, financial assistance, safe-housing, and job assistance. Toos Heemskerk is one of these social workers, and she oversees most of the Scarlet Cord's work specifically in Amsterdam. She explains, "It's only when you go to the places of the trafficking that you begin to understand... We need to know the story of the woman. We need to have people out there who want to touch their lives, who want to show them you are much more valuable than this 50 euro you make." These women are the experts. They know what they've experienced, and they don't need an outside source attempting to tell their story to them. Rather, sources that want to be

helpful need these girls' stories to make a meaningful difference. Sometimes listening is all it takes to prove to a girl that she's valuable, that she's loved, that she deserves to thrive.

Heemskerk also works for Not For Sale, another ministry fighting sexwork worldwide. In Amsterdam, NFS offers professional culinary training to girls that desire to leave the district behind, having received help from the social workers that courageously enter into their workplaces. Once the girl is adequately trained, NFS helps set her up with a job or paid internship either in Amsterdam or in her home country, depending on where the girl will heal best ("Country Project"). NFS offers the type of help that Project 1012 doesn't, as Project 1012 only accounts for women's immediate and not long-term needs. By seeking to catch women before they enter the industry, and then by seeing women all the way through their full healing after leaving the industry, Not For Sale cares for the full person. This is a Christian approach to ministry. One would love oneself all the way to full healing, and a Christian should love their neighbor the same way.

According to Heemskerk, the truly long-term solution is to create viable job opportunities in Eastern Europe so that women aren't forced to take out loans and, in turn, wind up believing that they're worthless and prostituting themselves in Western Europe. This is a lofty goal, though, one that would involve overturning economic and political systems. With time, this sort of social change can and will occur, should innovative minds continue to listen to individual stories and act based on what women are willing to share. For now, though, walking the individual through healing and helping her into a viable, respectable job that celebrates her humanity is a tremendous start towards overarching social change.

There aren't any simple conclusions to the problem of legalized prostitution in Amsterdam's Red Light District, primarily because not everyone agrees that the industry is

problematic. As Christians, then, our job is simply to mimic Christ's love for these women to these women, always remembering that our "bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in [us], whom [we] have received from God" (*Holy Bible*). In turn, we are to remind these women that their bodies were made for so much more than artificial love. We are to enter into their homes despite social norms, like Christ did. We are to listen to their stories, like Christ did, and we are to speak truth into their situations, like Christ did. And because Christ is the creator and ruler of all we know, He understands us perfectly and is perfectly equipped to minister to humanity. Similarly, Christians need to do all they can to understand the complexity of legalized prostitution, of human trafficking, of loverboys, and of the psychology that renders women willing to sell their own bodies. It's only with intimate knowledge of a person that ministry will be most effective, and it's only with intimate knowledge of the complex dynamic of Amsterdam's Red Light District that change will occur. So to best help our sisters trapped in the vicious cycle of sexwork, Christians must continue to listen, continue to learn, and continue to embody 1 John chapter four verse twelve: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (*Holy Bible*).

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