

FAITH
AND
THOUGHT

1978
vol. 105
No. 3

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the
Christian Revelation and modern research

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**THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT
of
CHRISTIAN SEXUAL ETHICS**

This paper, of which the title is self-explanatory, is one of the four given at the recent VI symposium on sexual ethics.

In this paper I shall assume without debate that a Christian ought to be guided by the teaching of the Scriptures on sex, as on other matters affecting personal conduct.

I understand the biblical teaching on this subject to be, put very briefly as follows.

Human sexuality, a manifestation of a wider polarity running through nature (or at least living nature) is a God-given and glorious complementarity between the sexes and is essentially good. (There is a wonderful passage in C.S. Lewis's *Peregrinatio*, which makes this point when the two Oyarsa appear to human eyes¹.)

The Creator's standard for fulfilment by man of his sexual potential is an exclusive and life-long pledged commitment between one man and one woman which we know as marriage, in which the physical union of this covenant is only the expression, the sign and seal, of a deeper 'one-flesh' union. The Bible, reserves the physical, genital expression of sexual potentiality for marriage, and sets a standard of total physical restraint elsewhere.

Expanding somewhat, we note that certain sexual practices are condemned. These are the various perversions listed in the Old Testament, and echoed in the New — adultery, fornication, sodomy, bestiality, incest (in various degrees) and prostitution.

All these are forbidden — all six in the Old Testament attracted the death penalty, although in the case of prostitution only when the girl was the daughter of a priest.

With regard to sexual attitudes, we may note three points. Firstly, the Bible is very positive, in that it encourages the mutual delight of husband and wife in each other. And this in at least four dimensions; (1) companionship, that is, mutual social interchange, conversation, shared action, the making of the home and so on. (2) There is in this delight an element of aesthetic admiration, husband and wife finding each other lovely, beautiful, admirable. (3) There is physical enjoyment of nearness and union, and (4) there is loving delight in self-sacrifice (as in Ephesians 5 and other passages). The negative side of this wonderful, positive delight in one another is seen when the particular human instinct upon which it is founded becomes focussed in other directions. The destructive power of male lust is clearly recognised in Scripture, from the story of Samson right through to the Sermon on the Mount and the warnings of the Epistles. Marriage canalises the God-given sexual instinct but we are all too well aware, also, of its immense potential for evil. In a limited sense marriage can be viewed as a safeguard against the abuse of sex.

According to the teaching of Scripture, there is a certain temporary, dispensable quality in all human relationships. Jesus taught very clearly that if there is a clash between allegiance to Him and allegiance to husband or wife or any one else, then He must come first. He also taught that in heaven there is neither marrying nor giving in marriage. In other words, sex recedes, though it must be added that sexual complementarity as a fact is not therefore abolished, even in eternity. After all, if Galatians 3:28 (which says there is neither male nor female) applies to the Church on earth, and yet the Church does all sorts of things — marrying and encouraging people to acknowledge, respect and enjoy the complementarity of sex in every legitimate way — then it is reasonable to suppose that *some* awareness of this created structure will (or at least may) persist in heaven, just as there are hints that national differences will somehow be wonderfully preserved and glorified. Paul would prefer Christians, in certain contexts at least, to be unmarried, but realises (as Jesus taught) that celibacy is a gift — some have it, others have not.

Further, the Bible teaches that there is a certain hierarchial order in the relationship between man and woman. There is order as well as equality. This aspect of Christian sexual ethics often goes against the grain today, but Christian marriage and church order clearly imply a hierarchial principle, with the man as 'head' set over the woman. In a challenging passage C.S. Lewis wrote "I do not believe that God created an egalitarian world". For Lewis there is always order. "I believe in the authority of parent over child, husband over wife, learned over simple, to have been as much a part of the original plan as the authority of man over beast."²

I

Having outlined, briefly, what I believe to be the biblical teaching of sex, I shall now review, chronologically, the way the Church has understood and reacted to this teaching. Five stages may, I believe, be distinguished.

The first century was a time of moral uncertainty in the ancient world, the world in which the Gospel was first preached. The Church took over the challenging Jewish sexual and family ethic. Though this was austere, it conformed to a perennial pattern which is to be found in all human societies which know the necessity for human sexuality to be to some degree confined and controlled for the good of all. This is as we should have expected. Grace does not abolish nature but perfects it, as Aquinas pointed out. What the Christian Gospel did was to take, to refine, to elevate, and to clarify what the Jew accepted on God's authority and the good pagans already dimly sensed about sexual ethics.

The Graeco-Roman world of course tolerated prostitution, pederasty and sodomy; the gods which the ancients worshipped were no better. Yet there was also a longing and a yearning, often lived out in the lives of many good pagans, particularly in the school of Stoic philosophy beginning from the third century BC onwards. We find a search for a calm detachment which would renounce the following of instinct and passion, a groping for a dimly glimpsed pattern of standards of disinterested virtue which, it was believed, somehow harmonised with a Universal Reason. This ethic, particularly in the writings of Seneca, finds many echoes in New Testament ethical injunctions, though Stoic principles do not form a constellation with the total pattern, motivation and vision which Christian ethics show. But this

stoic philosophy, though an available option in the pagan world, proved inadequate for the normal person. The human spirit cried out for something more challenging, more colourful and more exciting. This was provided by the mystery religions and cults emanating from Eastern sources, whose worship contained orgiastic rites and whose origins can be seen fairly clearly in the fertility cults of the primitive communities centuries before. These elements produced confusion and conflict in sexual ethics in the first century world. Into *this* world entered the clarity and the stern challenge of the Judaeo-Christian standard. Professor Bruce has pointed out that "it was in the sphere of relations between the sexes that even the highest pagan ethic of the time fell far short of the Jewish and Christian standard ... Experience proved that insistent injunctions ... were by no means superfluous for Christians converted from paganism."³

II

Very soon the Church found itself confronted by *Gnosticism*, which became a perennial challenge. There are hints in some of the NT Epistles that gnostic errors were already infiltrating Christian thinking while the Apostles were still alive. The roots of Gnosticism are probably to be found in Persian and Indian myths and legends. The chief feature of gnostic teaching is the doctrine that the material universe is intrinsically evil. Therefore the physical body of a man or a woman is an evil thing, an impediment, a burden. Life in the flesh is a kind of imprisonment, for man is caged in by matter; something within us which is better and higher cannot get out, cannot fully express itself. As gnostic influences spread, Christianity was seen more and more as a way of escape from material entanglement. One of the early heresies was that of Marcion; Marcionites demanded celibacy or (for the married) marriage without sexual expression. This teaching could easily be grafted on to a facile, superficial understanding of the teaching of Romans 8, or of 1 Corinthians 7, though deeper exegesis shows that this is not what these passages are saying. However, gnostic influences in a modified form took root almost everywhere in the early church: the view of the early Fathers, almost to a man, is that marriage is some sort of encumbrance and very definitely a second best. This was underlined by the way marriage made martyrdom less acceptable to a Christian and increasingly in those times of persecution Christians were called to die for Christ. A cult of 'spiritual heroism' developed,

in which the positive value of self-denial, which is a basic Christian virtue, became attached particularly to the denial of marriage and sexual relationships. One commentator has called this rather nicely "the doctrine of conspicuous renunciation".

By the early fourth century sexual renunciation was deemed the highest peak of spiritual achievement and virginity intrinsically superior to married life. Hence the double standard - clergy, the superior class of Christians, were often expected to remain without any form of sexual expression: the laity were free of this restriction, but were reckoned second rate Christians. The development of monasticism from the late third century onwards underlined this division. At first many of the Christians who chose celibate lives became hermits who lived alone. Later the hermits began to congregate in groups, which led to the monastic movement. Clerical celibacy itself only became obligatory in the 11th century, but its seeds were sown six or seven centuries earlier. The ideal of celibacy was quite definitely held to be meritorious from the fourth century onwards. At this point any Bible Christian will immediately begin to see the red light. To teach that there is more merit, or that we *deserve* a better reward for living in a particular way is a denial of God's free grace. The Gospel is undercut by this kind of teaching. Augustine, the greatest teacher of the early Church (some would say the greatest teacher of the Church in any age), certainly had a little of this in his bones. His background was Manichaen; the Manichaen heresy involved these gnostic elements of scorn for the flesh and a denial of the body. Augustine taught that there was inevitable sin in marriage, an extra sin which was quite inescapable because marriage involved passion, passion involved various kinds of bodily expression, and this was essentially sinful. He taught, however, that it was conveniently covered by the sacrament. And the sacrament of marriage put a person back into more or less the same position as if he had committed an ordinary kind of sin as distinct from a mortal sin. This then is the challenge of gnosticism, the stress on the evil of matter, but of which arise notions of the exaltation of virginity, marriage as second best, clerical celibacy and the double standard.

III

The third section in this survey covers the epoch *Rome to the Renaissance*. After the decline and fall of the Roman Empire an interesting new factor came with the Germanic invasions of the so-

called Dark Ages and the establishment of the feudal system. The Teutonic social structure produced a society based upon land tenure as the key factor, as the most important of the factors operating. This undoubtedly strengthened the tendency to regard the wife as part of the possessions of the husband. For the feudal system, property defined status. The wife became an item of the husband's property. The struggle to keep the clergy chaste and celibate continued throughout the Dark Ages and the Middle Ages, one expression of which was the tremendous proliferation (well known to students of medieval literature) of legends stressing renunciation, virginity, the incredible achievements of those men and women who had kept themselves free of sexual entanglements, and not merely adulterous or promiscuous ones, but free from marriage itself. There is a constant disparagement of sex and marriage in all the most popular religious manuals and literature, though grudgingly marriage was conceded to be no barrier to salvation.

In the end a reaction was inevitable. Firstly in the 11th and 12th centuries we note the rise of the ethic of courtly love. There is still considerable discussion amongst scholars as to where this new outlook came from. Some suggest Arabian sources, others Celtic legends (Tristan certainly came from the Celtic roots), others suggest neo-Platonism. Wherever it came from, we know what it was. The courtly love ethic dignified passion, the very thing that Augustine so hated. It exalted woman, it put the beloved on a pedestal above man, gave her superior status and worshipped her from afar — at least for most of the time (many men had their precise physical aims and objectives which sometimes they managed to achieve in the end) as a superior being. Typically, the troubadour or the poet of love admired a married woman, often the wife of his liege lord, a woman who was therefore by definition, at least officially, inaccessible to him. And his poem or his song was a hymn to the unobtainable woman. This created and dignified male longing and tension. This male devotion to the distant beloved was, of course, in sharp contrast to marriage. Indeed, the courtly love ethic still retained a rather scornful view of marriage, just as the Church had done. In marriage husband and wife are one, and the woman is not put on a pedestal. In marriage husband and wife are satisfied, there is none of the unrequited yearning which was the basis of courtly love. Husbands and wives tend to take each other for granted, and the unrewarded devotion which is the mainspring of the poetry corresponds to no normal marital experience.

The 13th century saw a renewal of the cult of Mary, which is particularly important for sexual ethics. The roots of the devotion to Mary go back to earlier centuries. One key step was the Council of Ephesus as early as AD 431, when Mary was officially given the title of "Mother of God" (*Theotokos*) and became chief of the saints, most elevated of the glorified believers. As the practice of saying prayers to saints gradually increased, so Mary became a principal focus of devotion and prayer. By 600 AD she was regularly prayed to, as is evidenced by all the contemporary manuals of prayer. The climax of this centuries-long development can be seen in 1854 and as late as 1950. In 1854 it was declared by the Church of Rome that Mary was immaculately conceived and in 1950 that after death her body was taken into heaven (the bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary). It is natural to see the cult of the Virgin in the 13th century as a baptised version of courtly love - because the result is precisely the same as *l'amour courtois* achieved. Woman, in this case a particular woman, is set high above man on a pedestal. Naturally the image of the Virgin Mary thereupon became a tremendous support for the cult of virginity, because it was believed she was perpetually virgin. The brothers and sisters of our Lord who were mentioned in the Gospels were taken not to have been her children and therefore the place of the perpetual Virgin, almost within the Godhead, became a support for the superiority of virginity.

Love in marriage, in our modern sense, is not unknown in the Middle Ages (as the story of Héloïse and Abelard demonstrates), though it does not appear consistently in the literature and fiction of the period. Virginity is always best. And the heart of marriage lay in its sacramental nature, i.e. what the Church did to make it spiritually and morally tolerable, rather than in any positive interchange and delight such as the Bible clearly encourages in the Song of Solomon and in other places. Marriage, in other words, needed Church blessing, institutional form and purification. Renaissance Italy was a kind of early *de facto* secularisation of culture and one of the results of this certainly was increased sexual licence. This licence penetrated into the Church itself because of the severe restrictions upon what Biblical Christians would see as the right use of sex. Never has the sexual practice of Christians in official positions, Bishops, Cardinals, Popes and so on, sunk so low as in Renaissance Italy.

IV

The Reformation made one essential contribution; this was to remove the stigma attached to wedlock. The inferiority of marriage was denied, since it could not be found in Scripture, and the defiling nature of marriage as a doctrinal belief completely disappeared in the writings of the theologians of the Reformation. The Biblical ethic almost *in toto* was rediscovered. And this is summed up, like so many other aspects of the Reformation, by the experience of Luther himself. It is not our intention to suggest that Luther in person gave the Reformation its characteristic shape, because that was given by the Bible. Nevertheless, in a remarkable way Luther's own experience does mirror almost all the great truths that the Reformation rediscovered. Celibacy is a burden for most men, for example, and Luther felt it himself. He was not psychologically disturbed, as some of the Roman Catholic church historians of the 20's and 30's tried to make out, but certainly like nearly all of the priests of his day, he found himself strongly tempted in the sexual field. When he visited Rome he was appalled by what he found there. We have no reason to disbelieve his own statements that as far as actions were concerned, he remained chaste. As he studied his Bible he discovered what was to become a commonplace in Protestant theology - marriage as a remedy for sin. In his own early experience he clearly found the sexual instinct a disruptive urge; it interrupted what he knew to be the spiritual standards he wanted to follow, and as a result his stress naturally comes upon marriage as a remedy. This teaching has good roots in 1 Corinthians 7, a passage stressed in his early writings. Certainly when he married a nun who had left the Church of Rome, Katherine von Bora, he not only discovered a new source of great personal happiness, but he found this was indeed in one aspect, God's remedy for sin. As he looked around at the contemporary Church after that experience, he frequently made strong comments on clerical concubinage which was so common. This he saw as simply resulting from the failure to recognise that God had provided marriage, open to all, to put instincts in their proper place.

Luther went further, however, in stressing the essential goodness of procreation. He rediscovered for Christendom the positive value of home life and restored the family to a prime place in Christian ethics. The home, Luther taught, is a school for character. Certainly his own home, not only with his own children but with the constant to and fro of visitors, students

and other youngsters, whom Luther and his wife delighted to entertain and to teach, gave him this first hand experience of what an 'open' Christian home could offer. As some theologians have put it, the home became for Protestants what, previously, the monastery had been for Catholics. It was God's order (normative pattern) for man, and in this order sex found its proper place. As regards the relationship between husband and wife, we do not have a strong stress upon what we would today call romantic love in marriage. Luther stresses more the companionship, the joy, the sadness too, and also the inevitable strain and tension. Luther was always realistic, as is admitted even by those who disagree with him. There is certainly no idealised, ethereal wife-figure in Luther's experience and teaching. The wife is made of flesh and blood and is fallible, just as the husband is. He often spoke in his pastoral writings of the wife as a man's nearest neighbour.

The English Puritans of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries represents our own particular brand of Reformation teaching and ethics, a wonderfully rich vein of scriptural pastoral teaching. They constantly stress in their practical writings the fact that husband and wife are 'heirs together of the grace of life', as the New Testament puts it, and as such they should be spurring each other on to spiritual progress. They should be a help to each other in the Christian life - watching over each other's progress and correcting each other's faults in love. To some degree this stress does de-sexualise marriage. There is very little attention paid to the narrowly sexual dimension of marriage in the ethical manuals. The total pattern of home and family responsibilities is realistically treated. In Richard Baxter's *Christian Directory* there is a passage in which he urges Christians to think hard about marriage before they actually enter into it. First he provides a long list of all the burdens, the difficulties and the problems. Only then does the picture brighten as Baxter says in effect, "Now if you still want to go on with it, let me tell you some of the good things that there are about marriage". Though not unaware of the blessings and joys, he does in fact put the difficulties first and he puts them very strongly. Romantic love is certainly recognised by the Puritans and the Quakers too, though it is for them an item which naturally blossoms after marriage rather than a factor which must be there as a prerequisite before marriage is undertaken.

V

I turn now to the modern period — 1700 onwards, which is the period of secularisation. Europe begins to break free from both the Catholic and the Protestant normative ethical concepts. We can pinpoint eight movements or influences, key factors which, although wider than sexual ethics, certainly impinge upon the way in which Christian sexual ethics have developed.

The first of these eight factors is the *Enlightenment*, the rise of rationalism in the so-called Age of Reason. Beginning at the end of the seventeenth century, this trend totally rejects the religious frame of reference for 'modern thinking men'. In the early years of the Enlightenment, both in this country and on the Continent, only physical science was affected and there was not much change in other ways of thinking. It was supposed, naively as we now see, that there would be no loss in simply dispensing with the external theistic framework, the traditional assertions which said that God created the universe and every creature in it. God as Creator may be completely denied, it was said, or merely retained in the back-ground as the great original Instigator. Either way it makes no difference to what men think or believe to be right or wrong, or to the way society is organised. Jettisoning full-blooded Christian supernaturalism (it was claimed) freed man of an intolerable ecclesiastical tyranny, where the Church decided everything that should happen and everything men do and believe. The Enlightenment liberated man from childish superstition — belief in miracles and in the incarnation, in particular. The clear, simple and lucid 'laws' of nature discovered by Sir Isaac Newton appealed irresistibly to the leaders of the Enlightenment. The new-world picture simply retained God as the Person who set the whole show going, and perhaps dropped some oil on the wheels occasionally, but who certainly was not necessary for understanding how it worked or for enabling man to live tolerably successfully within it. Reason was perfectly adequate. So reference to God or to the Church or to Christian teaching in ethics became increasingly rare.

On the surface there was no immediate or dramatic change. Marriage, for example, was not dealt with by rationalist thinkers in any different way. As regards those relationships which were regarded as 'best' and fruitful, it was simply assumed that things would more or less stay the same as they did when the Church ruled over everything in the field of morals and behaviour. With

hindsight we can see that if the doctrines of creation and judgment, of sin and Redemption, are deleted from the common awareness of a community, things are bound to begin to change. But certainly men in the age of Locke and the French Encyclopedia had no idea of this.

The Enlightenment was followed by *Romantic Movement*, a predictable reaction against an excessively intellectual ideal. The rationalists had advocated conscious control of feeling and a civilised elegance of taste in architecture, dress and manners: the Romantics in contrast emphasised the priority of emotion. The individual, must be fully himself; he must seek fulfillment as a unique person, no matter what social norms or civilised society may say. In one sense Romanticism was a protest against the civilised, sophisticated manners of the town - we remember Rousseau whose ideal educational protégé Emile was a young boy brought up in the country, suckled by a countrywoman far from the corruption of urban life, introduced only at adolescence to the world of the city. Romanticism was a protest against rational, intellectual, philosophical domination of thought and feeling - 'back to nature', 'express yourself' were typical watch words. But in the kind of culture which emerged, deprived of all reference to the divine, man inevitably begins to make his own deities, including deities in the sexual sphere. As Romanticism develops, the inescapable desire to worship returns, and who better to worship than woman? Goethe's *Faust Part 2*, though in some sense pre-romantic but having an immensely wide influence amongst the early Romantic thinkers, finishes with the words: "The eternal Woman draws us upwards" - a feminine principle seen in the seat of Divinity calling the best out of man and drawing him onwards and upwards. In the music-dramas of Wagner you will know the figures of Senta in the *Flying Dutchman*, of Elizabeth in *Tannhauser*, of Brünnhilde in *The Ring*, all of whom represent redemption through woman - woman drawing the best out of man and finally by self-sacrifice achieving his salvation. What we have here is a secularised form of the Virgin Mary, brought back because of a deep desire for some kind of redemptive philosophy.

The lives of the romantic poets, painters and musicians were lives of indulgence. Certainly this involved sexual indulgence, sometimes of a very strange and perverted kind. We can no more rejoice at the way Wagner treated women, than at the way he treated his creditors. (He borrowed money all over Europe with no intention of paying it back.) We may perhaps be grateful for his music but as Christians we reject the sort of behaviour that he

felt free to indulge in to achieve success. The Romantic ideal, then, set woman too high, and in the end it too had to collapse.

From the nineteenth century also comes a third influence — *Marxism*. According to this ultra-masculine, aggressive philosophy, traditional patterns of sexual differentiation, particularly marriage, must be viewed as devices for domination of man over woman. In the sexual ethics of the Marxist, woman becomes the equal of man, sexual differences are down-played and all human beings are seen as individuals in quest of freedom from economic exploitation. In the new communist economy they are free to be themselves. Here Christians will feel a certain measure of agreement, as they do with many other aspects of Marxism in its justified protest against exaggerated exploitation of all sorts. Marxists, for example, constantly speak of bourgeois marriage and prostitution in the same breath, as does Engels in his *Marriage, Property and Society*. There is more than a grain of truth in this analysis, as one can see in the darker sides of earlier societies. But the whole tone and temper of this view of sexuality is distasteful to the Christian conscience. It is a new 'hard' form of egalitarianism, which denies any kind of essential difference in social function between the sexes, which marriage and motherhood certainly demand. The theory led to the most ghastly and costly experiments in the 1920's and 30's in early Soviet Russia — experiments which have ultimately been rejected. The USSR tried abortion on demand and the complete abolition of the marriage contract or marital relationships as in any way needing social sanction; they have since pulled back from this on account of the social dislocation it caused.

Because, in earlier societies, woman was seen to be nothing but the property of man, all the scorn that Marx and Engels poured upon private property was also poured upon bourgeois marriage. Yet they had little positive to put in its place. They advocated no positive ideal of complementarity, no model of feminine behaviour to offer, for them marriage was seen simply as a bourgeois invention to be dispensed with. It has been noted by later sociologists that marriage is ultimately hostile to any kind of political theory of this type, because marriage and the home are the great enemy of the collectivist state. Like all other kinds of totalitarian social engineering from Plato onwards, the Utopian social engineer in Marxist socialism can only flourish when the individual as an independent, creative source of moral judgments (and therefore possibly of a critique of the existing order) has been destroyed. Where else does the individual develop

his own particular identity more successfully than in the home? The home is made in physical terms by private property (land and a dwelling), in non-physical terms it consists of the bonds between husband, wife and children. There is an interesting and moving passage in a symposium written by a number of Soviet writers, most of them still living in the Soviet Union (and therefore in some cases referred to by pseudonyms or initials). One of them is a mathematician and a Helsinki monitor called Igor Shafarevich, who writes: "One of the fundamental characteristics of human society is the existence of individual relations between people. As the excellent behaviourist researchers of the past decades have shown, we're dealing here with a phenomenon of very ancient pre-human origin. There are many kinds of social animals and the societies they form are of two types: the anonymous and the individualised. In the first, for instance, as in a shoal of herrings, the members do not know each other individually and they are interchangeable in their relationships. In the second, for example, a gaggle of wild geese, relations arise in which one member plays a special role in the life of another and cannot be replaced. The presence of such relations is in a certain sense a factor which determines individuality and the destruction of these individual relations is one of the proclaimed goals of socialism; between husbands and wives and between parents and children⁴".

Fourthly in the setting of secularisation comes *Freudianism* — especially in its popularised form. Freud, a Jewish atheist, like Marx, has a pessimistic view of human nature and its potential. Freud is influenced firstly by his own dogmatic materialism, very popular in the Vienna of his early days, and secondly by his clinical examination of a limited number of disturbed individuals. The new model of man which Freud developed, which has been immensely influential, is a model which seems to send out the following two messages: 1 — Sex is bigger than you think; 2 — Sex restrained is more dangerous than you suspect. As for the first — there is certainly an all pervasive stress in the writings of Freud upon the powerful, deep and almost inevitable involvement of the sexual instinct in every kind of pathological condition that he examined. And therefore, Freud would say, in every aspect of the life of every human being. Secondly, sex restrained is more dangerous than you suspected. Popular Freudianism sees sex as a thing which must be released — you cannot put it down or put a brake on it. If you do you induce neurosis. Restraint leads to the break-up of character. Therefore, the first step is to admit you've got sexual hang-ups — the very fact that you deny it shows that you have (a lovely argument which works both ways!):

secondly, rid yourself of sexual hang-ups by some form of sexual self-expression. The build-up of instinctual pressure needs release, otherwise you will do yourself untold damage. This is of course something of a caricature! But it is the *popular* Freudianism of today in this country from the 1930's onwards which has had such immense influence. Scholarly readers know that *repression* in Freud is a highly technical term; it doesn't mean simply saying 'no' to sexual indulgence whenever you're tempted. We know that *sublimation* is a real possibility, a term for the use in all sorts of creative ways of that energy which perhaps in its roots is sexual. Scholarly readers know that Freud wrote quite clearly that restraint in sexual matters is the only basis — a fragile one perhaps — for the development of great art, great science, and what we know as civilisation. He may be wrong here, but that was what Freud taught. And therefore, even in his terms, restraint has tremendous positive social functions. But these are the messages which have not penetrated. It is the earlier caricature which has become so current. And the impact on our culture has been to produce a crudely materialistic reductionism — this is all man is, this is all you're really after, whatever you say you're after. It is Freudian thinking which has dealt such a crushing blow to the romantic idealism which, in a secular sense, helped to keep woman on her pedestal.

The fifth secularising trend of today is *Existentialism*, the end-product of all the systems which have attempted to do without God. Let us face the fact, says the existentialist, that we exist in a meaningless universe. There was no God to start it off in the beginning; no absolute ethical imperatives of any kind whatever make demands of us. As an individual all I can do is to try to be myself. How do I become myself? I find something to do which is genuinely me, uncaused and unconditioned, something which is authentically my own. Preferably I will discover something which cuts across convention, across what father and mother taught me, across what sanity is telling me to do — in fact, the more aggressively different it is the more I can be sure it is authentically my deed. Very often this search for authenticity can be neatly linked with the pursuit of pleasure in some new and special way, irrespective of whether it harms my neighbour or not. This is the existential hedonism so perfectly portrayed in "Last Tango in Paris" and in later films. It is the dominant mode of ethical thinking outside the Christian church today among agonised intellectuals and many others too, though they would not all know it by this name. And it is without principle or criteria — a complete relativism in ethics.

We must now note three other developments under this broad heading of secularisation; items which differ slightly from the five '-isms' just mentioned.

The sixth development is the result of *technological advances* which have influenced sex ethics. Techniques of contraception and abortion have been known since ancient times. Now, however, they are safe, cheap and well publicised. Contraception enables the personal and procreative aspects of sex to be separated. In earlier ages, outside and within the Christian Church, it was much debated whether the two aspects — the love-relational and the generational — should always be connected. What was never considered was whether man could or should separate them completely. Techniques of contraception enable this to be done. As regards abortion, it is now possible to destroy quite easily the unborn child in the womb and this surgical procedure has been made widely available both privately and on the National Health Service. Socially agreed ethical criteria for the right use of these new techniques are weak or non-existent.

The background to these developments helps us to understand what has given them such impetus. We note factors such as the over-population scare: world population is said to be increasing so swiftly that our resources may eventually come under impossible strain, therefore procreation needs to be controlled. Then there is a subtle tendency in the scientific mind which implies the principle that 'because we can we should'. If we are able to do something, we ought to go ahead and do it. This drive put man on the moon and in an earlier decade contributed to the development of the atomic bomb. There is no doubt that technological possibilities have decisively altered the social context in which sexual discussion and sexual decisions take place.

Seventhly, there is what we may call *permissive social neutrality* adopted as a deliberate policy. This is a new phenomenon in Britain, brought to the fore by a trend in legislation since the 2nd World War. It is as if there is a tacit agreement to regard sexual activity as a sphere in which the Government says, "Look — we are granting you freedom to do exactly as you wish in your private life in order to compensate you for the tighter grip with which we shall hold you in other directions". This explains the liberal policies now in vogue in what is called the "private area" — the area of sex and entertainment in particular. Government speakers (no doubt reading carefully prepared scripts prepared by civil servants who do not change with the party in

power) assure us that "these are matters of conscience on which it would be inappropriate for members of the House to expect party leadership or for the Government to give guidance." In this sphere, beginning in 1959 and working through the late '60's, we noted the changes in laws relating to obscenity, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, theatre censorship, capital punishment and Sunday observance. All the changes carry the message that this country is no longer prepared in any institutional way to commend Christian standards. Effectively Government began to ignore the Christian moral tradition, and implicitly to deny that the function of the law is to uphold moral standards of behaviour.

Our eighth and final influence in the age of secularisation is the *mass media*. Technological development in connection with newspapers, magazines, cinema and TV, have made it easy for those in positions of influence to be increasingly overt in the portrayal of sex. The moral "messages" about what sexual activity should or should not be are confused, and invasions of the private realm which earlier generations would have found horrifying and distasteful are almost *de rigueur*. Perhaps our predecessors were wrong. But there is no doubt that, traditionally, Christians have stood for a certain degree of reticence in public discussion, reporting and display of sexual matters. There are, we must concede, degrees of reticence that are unbiblical, and matters in which Christians have been too mealy-mouthed. But this modern trend is resulting in the destruction of sexual activity as a private matter — it is now for millions of people a matter for spectator interest. What the psychiatrists refer to as the "voyeur role" is encouraged. And here we must leave our fifth and final era — the age of secularisation.

Conclusion

Where do we stand today? At the risk of over-simplifying we may say that present-day educated Christians take one or other of two diametrically opposed view points. The first, is that of the (wrongly called) 'new morality'. This development belongs again to the early '60's. The former Bishop of Woolwich, John Robinson, testified for Penguin Books at the Lady Chatterly trial in 1961. Then came Robinson's *Honest to God* in 1963; *Soundings* from a group of Cambridge academics in 1961; *Towards a Quaker View of Sex* 1963, and so on right up to our media favourites of today from Cambridge — Norman Pittenger, Don Cupitt and others. The

view common to these writers represents a blend of theological liberalism with a very cavalier attitude to the Bible — but it attempts to communicate with the existential hedonism which society around us increasingly adopts as its standard (if indeed it can be called a standard). The 1960's also brought a decade of popularity for Alex Comfort, and for the Reith Lectures of Carstairs, both of which gave a much more permissive, non-Christian direction to sexual ethics. A typical quotation summarises this trend as it took root in the Churches. John Robinson said when lecturing in Liverpool Cathedral in 1963 — "There is no such thing as a Christian ethic", and later "there is no ethical system which can claim to be Christian".⁵ Robinson, like many of this group, adopts a position which involves a rejection of theism itself, of God as transcendent Creator, Ruler and Lord, of God as Law-giver, of propositional revelation, including the positive Old Testament law as well as the specific commandments of the New, of the reverence for the Torah, which God has given in His kindness to guide us, to save us from hurting ourselves and our neighbours. This position also involves rejection of the concepts of transgression, guilt and justification as taught in the New Testament, and therefore of the Gospel itself. It is scarcely surprising therefore that Gosepl ethics also disappear with the Gospel itself.

A second group of Christians, recognising difficulties in traditional beliefs, demands renewed scholarly study of the Scripture to ensure that exegesis is correct so that what God has said may be applied in everyday life. This is the only reverent, authentic Christian way forward. It is not always easy. But we have a line of distinguished thinkers in the field to help in matters of sexual ethics. C.S. Lewis died in '63, just before the great wave of relativism, but his writings are full of penetrating insights. We may note *Christian Behaviour* (1943) and particularly his *Four Loves* (1960). The last book falls below Lewis's usual standard of lucidity and consequently is not as popular or as widely read as most of his other works. V.A. Demant's *Christian Sex Ethics* (1963) is a splendid little book. A short but perceptive historical survey is provided by Luther scholar R.H. Bainton in *Sex Love and Marriage* (Fontana 1958). From the medical profession we have *Venereal Disease and Young People* (1964), a BMA Report. This was caricatured by the BBC the morning it came out, and having been condemned by the media it was relegated to obscurity and is little known. Two paperbacks which analyse contemporary trends and hit back hard are *The New Morality* and *The Cult of Softness* by Arnold Lunn and Garth Lean (1964 and 1965, Blandford). Their brilliance and accuracy are unbeatable.

Predictably they were ignored by the media. Pioneer work has been done by the Roman Catholic psychiatrist Jack Dominian who, in a number of his books, writes from a wealth of clinical and counselling experiences on marriage and marital relationships. In 1971 the Scripture Union produced an excellent book, *God, Sex and You*, by the Canadian Christian psychiatrist M.O. Vincent. A rather unusual book, full of excellent material but also with more than a dash of traditional Victorianism is Larry Christenson's *The Christian Family* (1971): this has become second only to the Bible in this area for many in the Charismatic movement. Certain issues of the Grove Ethics booklets are outstandingly helpful; David Field on *homosexuality*, Paul Ramsey on *One Flesh*, and Oliver O'Donovan on *abortion* must be mentioned, but others in that series are much less helpful. The two Anglican official reports on *Marriage and Divorce* (1971 and 1978) also produced much helpful material, especially in the field of close textual study of the Bible (though not always with orthodox views about Scripture) and with a rich historical dimension. Even for Christians who put themselves under the authority of the Bible, the permitted conditions of divorce and the possibility of remarriage for divorced persons whose former spouse is still living are issues on which agreement has not been universally reached.

In 1971 there also emerged a concerted Christian movement expressing concern at the national decline of Christian sex ethics, especially in the mass media. Beginning with a huge demonstration in Trafalgar Square on September 25th and a mass evangelistic meeting the same evening in Hyde Park (where it is estimated 80,000 people were present), the Nationwide Festival of Light became transformed in three years into a small central information and advice service on behalf of those wishing to take Biblical standards in social life seriously, and in particular to uphold the sexual ethic of Scripture as the national norm. Though more usually seen as a voice of protest (which it has been on many occasions, and to some effect in the mass media) its ongoing work is geared to teaching and informing Christians so that they more adequately engage in witness to, and (where necessary) conflict for, the values God has given.

In some ways the Churches have an unhappy legacy in the field of sexual ethics. Firstly the idea that sexual activity is a sin of a special and peculiarly reprehensible kind is unbiblical. But it dies hard, and frequently it is still attributed to us. Secondly, our standards of reticence over sexual matters have exceeded the modesty which the Bible encourages, and both our

children and our enemies have reached wrong conclusion from our silence or our evasions. We have not taught plainly. It is ironical that at the very moment when we are freeing ourselves from both these impediments, society is drifting further away from its Biblical moorings, thanks to the strenuous efforts of a tiny minority and the ignorance and apathy of the majority. How much of our Christian heritage of social morality - God-given and therefore good for *all* men and women - can be saved for the stability and happiness of future generations remains at present problematic. Even the leadership of many of our churches seems unsure of the note to sound. To take the most obvious example: strident voices are raised demanding the church's approval of homosexual practice as a permitted expression of 'love' between two men, despite clear Scriptural prohibitions. It is perhaps at this point that Christians sexual ethics may prove to be the most divisive item of all within the visible church. Are our people equipped for an era of such confusion?

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