

# BEACH BUZZ

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"Keeping Our Beaches Bare"

## Sex and God: Is Religion Twisted?

*Behold the age-old antagonism toward all things sexual*

By James A. Haught

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“Christian endeavor,” H. L. Mencken wrote, “is notoriously hard on female pulchritude.” He was right, of course, and he should have included Jewish endeavor and Muslim endeavor in his observation. Western religions have spent millennia inflicting shame, guilt, repression, and punishment upon human sexuality – especially women’s sexuality.

Asian faiths aren’t so punitive. They generally accept lovemaking as a natural part of life. Some Hindu temples are covered with statues of copulating gods and goddesses.

Millions of Shiva worshippers pray over models of his erect penis. Tantric sects practice ritual intercourse.

But the West presents an opposite, ugly story: a long chronicle of religious hostility to lovers – for no rational reason.

### ANNALS OR ANTAGONISM

The Old Testament raged against “whoredom” and commanded that nonvirgin brides be stoned to death (Deut. 22:21).

In the first century C.E., Paul urged celibacy for Christians. The earliest known papal decree, issued by Pope Siricius in 386 A.D., attempted (without much success) to forbid church elders from making love with their wives. Scholar Resy Tannahill says that early Christian leaders made sex and sin synonymous. “It was Augustine who epitomized a general feeling among the church fathers that the act of intercourse was fundamentally disgusting,” she says. “Arnobius called it filthy and degrading, Methodius unseemly,

Jerome unclean, Tertullian shameful, Ambrose defilement.”

When priests oversaw the historic witch hunts – in which thousands of women were tortured and burned – church writings reeked of revulsion to female sexuality. A medieval cardinal, Hughes de St. Cher, wrote: “Woman pollutes the body, drains the resources, kills the soul, uproots the strength, blinds the eye, and embitters the voice.”

In late nineteenth-century America, Anthony Cornstock and his “Committee for the Suppression of Vice” pursued sex like a hunted animal. About 2,500 people

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were convicted on morality charges, and Congress passed the puritanical Comstock Laws. Margaret Sanger was jailed eight times for advocating birth control.

Until recently, thanks to church pressure, nearly every U.S. state had Old Testament-style laws against “fornication” and “sodomy” and the like. It wasn’t until 1972 that the U.S. Supreme Court finally ruled that all American couples have a right to practice birth control. The clergy’s opposition to contraception had been based not so much on a desire for limitless breeding as a desire to prevent people from enjoying the sexual freedom brought by birth control.

Today, the church’s ability to imprison nonconformists has receded. However,

nearly every censorship effort or attempt at sexual repression still comes from religion.

North Carolina’s 1.2 million Southern Baptists recently voted to shut off their television sets for a day to protest “moral depravity” in shows such as “NYPD Blue,” which contains partial nudity and sexual situations.

In 1993, Pope John Paul II declared unmarried sex and birth-control “intrinsically evil.” In my city (Charleston, West Virginia), two brave nuns, Patricia Hussey and Barbara Ferraro, battled Catholicism’s sexual taboos until they finally were forced out of their order. They recounted their struggle in a 1990 book, *No Turning Back*. It says: “The church really hates the idea of people having sex for fun . . . there is something prurient and dishonest about the church’s loathing for the body.”

As the American public has seen, sometimes the ministers who rail loudest against “filth” and “pornography” are cloaking their secret sins. Television evangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker both fell to private sex scandals. Georgia revivalist Mario Leyva went to prison in 1990 for sodomizing more than 100 church boys, and two assistant pastors likewise were jailed. Numerous such cases appear in the news.

As American clergy endlessly strive to censor sex from public media, an odd contradiction has arisen: Ministers raise little objection to a movie containing 50 murders – but a glimpse of a woman’s nipple brings their wrath. A popular song commented: “Bullets fly like popcorn on the screen, recommended wholesome, nice and clean. Making love’s the thing that can’t be seen Why?”

(Using legal language, Congress and state legislatures periodically ponder laws to imprison purveyors of ultimate sexual acts. In my newspaper, I once asked



readers to suggest what might be the ultimate sexual act. A couple in a rubber raft going over Niagara Falls? Two elephants in a china shop?)

Meanwhile, the sexual hangups of Christianity today are trivial compared to those in the Muslim world, where suppression of women continues at Old Testament levels. Some examples:

- In Muslim Somalia, an estimated 98% of girls are genitally mutilated to inhibit their sexual pleasure throughout their lives and keep them "pure" for husbands. But it doesn't always work.

- In 1993, a United Nations team found five women being stoned to death for adultery. They had been condemned by mosque leaders, and the execution was carried out after evening prayers. Cheering villagers videotaped the killing. U.N. observers who tried to save the women were driven off by threats of death. U.N. agent Cecelia Kamau said bitterly: "Fundamentalism is really catching on."

- In Muslim Algeria, zealots shot high school girls in the face for not wearing veils and cut the throats of professors who taught boys and girls in the same classrooms.

- In Muslim Iran, morality patrols flog women who allow a lock of hair to show beneath their shrouds, and clerics laboriously black out women's faces in imported magazines.

- In Muslim Afghanistan, a major mujahideen (holy warrior) leader got his start by throwing acid in the faces of unveiled college girls. Now that even more puritanical Talibari religious students have seized Afghanistan, they've decreed that all windows must be painted black, lest someone look at woman through one, and they stone women to death for being in the company of a man who isn't a relative.

## WITHOUT REASON

It would probably take an army of psychiatrists and historians to pinpoint all the reasons Western religions developed such hostility toward human sexuality. More important is the question: Is this attitude justified? Are there ethical, rational reasons to support the religious condemnation of normal, sexual desires?

Perhaps the most detailed and insightful answer came from none other than humanist Bertrand Russell, who said that a "morbid and unnatural" attitude toward sex is "the worst feature of the Christian

religion." And much of what he said applies with equal force to the other Western religions. He asserted that religious aversion to sex is not only unfounded, but harmful. Against the prevailing anti-sex views of religion, he argued that sexual pleasure is a positive good and that religious objections are based not on reason but on dogma. But perhaps his most important argument was that religious anti-sexuality attitudes inflict untold human misery, especially on women. He observed: Monks have always regarded Woman primarily as the temptress; they have thought of her mainly as the inspirer of impure lusts. The teaching of the church has been, and still is, that virginity is best, but that for those who find this impossible, marriage is permissible. "It is better to marry than to burn," as St. Paul brutally puts it. By making marriage indissoluble, and by

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### *Are there ethical, rational reasons to support the religious condemnation of normal, sexual desires?*

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stamping out all knowledge of the ars amandi, the church did what it could to secure that the only form of sex which it permitted should involve very little pleasure and great deal of pain. The opposition to birth control has, in fact, the same motive: if a woman has a child a year until she dies worn out, it is not to be supposed that she will derive much pleasure from her married life; therefore birth control must be discouraged.

Strangely, Russell said, the church doesn't seem to care how much misery its rigid sex laws inflict on people. He cited this example:

An inexperienced girl is married to a syphilitic man; in that case the Catholic Church says, "This is an indissoluble sacrament. You must endure celibacy or stay together. And if you stay together, you must not use birth control to prevent the birth of syphilitic children." Nobody whose natural sympathies have not been warped by dogma, or whose moral nature was not absolutely dead to all sense of suffering, could maintain that it is right and proper that that state of things should continue.

Russell maintained that it wasn't just

regarding sexual behavior that the Christian attitude was harmful to human welfare – but also regarding basic knowledge of sexuality.

Every person who has taken the trouble to study the question in an unbiased spirit knows that the artificial ignorance on sex subjects which orthodox Christians attempt to enforce upon the young is extremely dangerous to mental and physical health, and causes in those who pick up their knowledge by the way of "improper" talk, as most children do, an attitude that sex is in itself indecent and ridiculous. I do not think there can be any defense for the view that knowledge is ever undesirable. But in the particular case of sex knowledge there are much weightier arguments in its favor than in the case of most other knowledge. A person is much less likely to set wisely when he is ignorant than when he is instructed, and it is ridiculous to give young people a sense of sin because they have a natural curiosity about an important matter.

The basic problem, according to Russell, is that the church's ethics are confused. The church, by its insistence upon what it chooses to call morality, inflicts upon all sorts of people undeserved and unnecessary suffering because it has chosen to label as morality a certain narrow set of rules of conduct which have nothing to do with human happiness. And when you say that this or that ought to be done because it would make for human happiness, they think that has nothing to do with the matter at all. "What has human happiness to do with morals? The object of morals is not to make people happy."

Ironically, century after century of holy hostility to sex hasn't dampened humanity's zest for it. A 1992 World Health Organization report estimated that more than 100 million couples around the globe make love in a single day. And people relish sexual entertainment as well.

Most Westerners have come to regard sex as wholesome and wonderful. Sanctimonious strictures seem to suit fewer and fewer people. Episcopal 'priest Raymond Lawrence wrote in a national United Methodist journal: "The churches are in danger of evolving into havens for the sexually suppressed or, worse, communities of profound hypocrisy." ✨