

"SEX AS SACRAMENT: THE EVOLUTION OF A SEXUAL IDEAL"
[FORMERLY TITLED "SEXUAL RIGHTS"]

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OPENING WORDS

I'm going to be taking a predictably liberal position today on the question of sexual rights, and I would like, in the spirit of equal time, to begin with something written by a fundamentalist evangelical preacher, Pat Robertson. It's taken from something called Pat Robertson's Perspective, a Special Report to the Members of the 700 Club, published by the Christian Broadcasting Network. And if I get carried away with reading this, remember, these are his opinions and not mine.

"There is in the air today the unmistakable scent of the Antichrist spirit. It was present at the Tower of Babel. It was present in Sodom and Gomorrah. It was present in the French Revolution, Nazi Germany, and it is present in Europe and the United States today. The signs of the Antichrist spirit are clear. A significant minority, then a majority of people in a society, begin to throw off the restraints of history, then the restraints of written law, then accepted standards of morality, then established religion, finally God himself.

"The rebellion spreads like a disease. Honor, decency, honesty, self-control, sexual restraint, family values and sacrifice are replaced by gluttony, sensuality, bizarre sex, cruelty, dishonesty, fraud, waste, rampant inflation, delinquency, drunkenness, and drug-induced euphoria.

"Consider what has been happening in the United States. Consider the sexual revolution. Public standards regarding nudity, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, incest, child molestation and sadomasochism have either crumbled or are under fierce attack.

"Humanist educators are forcing sex education

without any moral standards upon little children. Courses in sex education are being offered which advocate masturbation, premarital sex and homosexuality.

"Since the religion of secular humanism has ruled that freedom of sexual expression is desirable, then it must create a dogma which minimizes what they consider the undesirable side effects of sexual pleasure. So that the sex party may continue without inconvenience, we have killed 8 million unborn infants since Roe versus Wade. In Washington, D.C. last year more babies died by abortion than were permitted to be born alive. In the last decade, the number of couples living outside of marriage and the number of babies born out of wedlock have doubled. One out of every six live births in the United States was out of wedlock.

"Will society recoil from these excesses? So far, the answer is regrettably, no. And why would it? The high priests of secular humanism, who control the universities and the legal education apparatus have said in their Humanist Manifesto, 'There should be no restraint on any expression of human sexuality.'

"Therefore, the emerging religion has spoken: unbridled sexuality is not immoral; in fact, it is helpful and good."

ADDRESS

I want to start by thanking the people who prepared this series and assigned me this topic. You know, preparing a platform address is spending a month reading and thinking and talking about a subject and being pretty much emerged in it. And I noticed that poor Judy Toth got Terrorism last month and this month Conflicting Needs, while I've spent my month preoccupied with sex, which has worked out well for me.

My purpose today is to address the sexual issues that I think are current today, the kind that are raised by fundamentalists like Pat Robertson. But I do not intend to respond by documenting the scapegoating or the false statements and halftruths that they use to make their case.

Nor do I intend to take an extreme liberal position in opposition either. I do not believe that morals are relative. I think there are universal

ideals. I don't believe that sex is merely recreation. I don't believe that abortion is as insignificant as any elective surgery. I don't believe that children should be free to make their own value choices. Nor do I see sex as merely an individual and not a social concern.

Both the extreme positions, extreme fundamentalism and extreme liberal, I think fail to address seriously the sexual issues of our generation. The perspective that I will develop today is one that I think is shared and can be shared by a majority of Christians and Jews and humanists alike.

I want to start by asking the question, "How do we -- as a culture, as a religion -- ideally make use of and respond to our sexual drive?" I will begin with an historical perspective, and I will end with some brief statements of my own on several key sexual issues.

Now in reading history, it isn't wholly possible to separate our sexual history from all the other religious, political and economic events and attitudes. Sexual history is also difficult to research because it's not as easily documented. Researchers have to look for sources that reveal what sexual life was actually like, the ideals and the sexual practices.

All in all, sexual history is something very complex that I can't fully review in an address or even a book. However, in whatever history on sex that you read, there is a certain pattern that is obvious, not subtle, that I'd like to address.

Two extremes are apparent. The extreme of unbridled sexual passion, as Pat Robertson calls it, on one side, and the unbridled sexual repression on the other side.

Now Bertrand Russell, in his History of Western Philosophy, describes in positive terms these two forces that he sees working themselves through history. And he calls the unbridled indulgence and the repressiveness, in positive terms, passion and prudence. He writes: "The civilized person is distinguished from the savage mainly by prudence that is forethought. He is willing to endure present pains for the sake of future pleasures. Tilling the soil is labor and cannot be done from spontaneous impulse. Civilization checks impulse through law, custom and

religion.

"But prudence can be carried too far. It can easily involve the loss of the best things in life. Through physical and spiritual passion, a human being recovers an intensity of feeling which prudence destroys. He finds the world full of delight and beauty and his imagination liberated from the prison of everyday preoccupation. Much of what is the greatest human achievement involves sweeping away of prudence by passion.

"Unfortunately, soon after the loss of prudence, anarchy and treachery follow. Without passion, life would be uninteresting. Without prudence, life is dangerous. Prudence versus passion is a conflict that runs through history. It is not a conflict in which we ought to side with one wholly or the other."

Now a look at sexual history shows that there have been great swings, moving over centuries at a time, from the so-called liberal, passionate, indulgent side to the fundamental, prudent, repressive side. Each side has argued for the hearts and the minds of individuals and societies. One side has seen sexuality as a source of pleasure, while the other has seen it as a source of pain. One side has seen it as release of sexual tension as one of the benefits. The other has seen the unleashing of cruelty. One side has seen the production of well-being and creativity in people. The other has seen a disruption of social stability. One has seen intimate bonding with other people. The other has seen the destruction of family and friendships.

But the swing back and forth has not been just a pendulum swing. It's been more like a spiraling toward a cone, rising to a point of an ideal. And I will describe where I think it points, what I think that ideal is, and show how that would apply to some of the sexual questions today.

Now to document a theory of sexual history, you have to refer to scholars and books in much more detail than I'll be able to today, so in order to illustrate my point, I'd like to just pick some examples which I think demonstrate along the way this spiraling through history.

When fundamentalists refer to Christian morals, they seem to imply a history that isn't really there, a consistency that isn't there. The Christian position on sex was not born full grown either in the teachings of Jesus or in the early Christian church. The sexual debate has gone on inside Christianity and outside Christianity in century after century.

Today the abortion issue is a major one. Twenty years ago it was birth control. Fifty years ago it was movies, alcohol and games, like "Pool, it's right here in River City". Seventy-five years ago it was singing, dancing and gay apparel. A hundred years ago the issue was anesthesia during childbirth. Laws were being proposed to stop the use of anesthesia. Horror stories were told about what really happens under anesthesia in the birthing room. It was seen that the scriptures, in Genesis, made clear that a punishment for eating the apple, one of the punishments was going to be that children would be born in pain, and so it was against the law of God to allow women to have birth without pain. The particular initiative was defeated pretty much by Queen Victoria singlehandedly, who having had six children by the natural way, tried anesthesia and proclaimed it wonderful. It's fortunate there wasn't a king at the time.

The consistency that underlies all of these positions is sexual repression. It arises from an ancient belief that the sex drive is the expression of the death force, that sexuality is an experience of the devil, and it violates the will of God. Therefore, sex is sinful and dangerous to individuals and society.

Now this position, in its oldest form, stood in opposition to the roots of the liberal religious tradition that says that sex is a direct experience of the life force. These two beliefs appear as extreme opposites throughout history. But increasingly, they become interwoven, forming a creative ying-yang, and I'd like to give some examples of the progression of the possibilities.

I'd like to begin with the first example that Bertrand Russell gives, which is from early Greece, Ancient Greece is a good example since it is such a remarkable culture that produced a kind of art, literature, philosophy and mathematics that radiated throughout history, informing people for hundreds of

years, and is still the basis for much of what we do. That remarkable culture started in the very hilly country of Greece, where cultures developed isolated from each other in farming valleys, where agriculture was the primary economic base, and the religions stressed social cooperation. But so-called barbarians from the north would invade the valleys and bring with them their gods.

Now one of the gods that was brought, the one that became the most popular in early Greece, was Bacchus, Dionysus. We know Bacchus and Dionysus as the god of wine and debauchery. But at root, Dionysus is a fertility god. The religion of Bacchus believed that the experience of God could be had in the act of sex. Dancing, and wine when it was discovered released the God spirit inside oneself; sex led to a higher consciousness, an unleashing of the creative energies of passion, of feeling good about oneself and feeling good about another.

Over the centuries, Bacchus evolved to the religion of Orphism, which understood that sex alone did not recreate the god experience, that there needed to be a balance, a time of abstinence and a time of celebration. The Orphics founded churches, the first churches of the sort that I know about. Their members attended orgies, which meant sacraments. The basis of the word orgy is sacrament.

Plato testified that he went to one of the orgies and came back cured of his morbid anxiety. He spoke very highly of it.

Another word from the Orphic tradition that you'll recognize is the word theory, which meant passionate contemplation, much like the word meditation means today. The Orphics practiced orgies and theories.

Pathagoras gained his mathematical insights while in a theory, and the modern meaning of theory of course comes from that which was produced by these meditative states -- theories.

These two acts, sex and meditation, were held to be sacred. I cite these examples to show how religions in every culture must control response to the sex drive, and a certain balance between abstinence and celebration is necessary. Without it, we have the

extremes of repression and indulgence.

Now let's look at how Christianity has coped with sexuality. We begin the period, both in Rome and northern Europe, with a period which I think you could call indulgent. In the 1st Century A.D. at the founding of the Christian Church 2,000 years ago in Rome, men were bisexual predators. Morals concerned how constructive or destructive they were in their sexual expression. Marriage existed but it was not for romantic love; it was not for sexual passion; it wasn't even for friendship. Marriage was a business arrangement between families with property. It was for producing heirs, for business mergers, for political influence, for improving social status, for profiting from dowries. The poor without property often had no marriages or did not marry at all in the formal sense. Sex slaves were kept; sexual affairs were common for both men and women, and public brothels abounded. And they would abound for another 16 centuries.

The sexual revolution in Rome actually began in the 2nd Century A.D. It began first with the pagan philosophers, the Stoics and the Neo-Platonists, and then the church fathers. In this revolution, they did not argue for sexual moderation or for sexual control. Instead, they established a new religious ideal in opposition to the Dionysian one. They established sexual asceticism, meaning the sexual denial as an act of religious devotion. Celibacy became the new ideal. To be single and a virgin was conceived the highest state of being. This ideal was not accepted without a great deal of struggle.

It was not until the 12th Century, 1,000 years later, that sexual asceticism had any real cultural reality. For example, religious marriages, entered into by a husband and wife, were not decreed until 786. And even into the 10th Century, ordinances allowed seven years of trial marriage. Church weddings were not required until after the 16th Century. Prostitution was tolerated. In fact, Thomas Aquinas, the great 13th Century theologian, argued for prostitution as being a necessary social institution. He always argues persuasively, and this is his argument, which is a very persuasive argument. "Prostitution", he said, "is necessary to social morality as a cesspool is essential to a house. Without it, the whole house would smell."

As to celibacy, the advocates of sexual denial didn't achieve celibacy for priests until the 12th Century. There were many steps along the way. At first, priests could marry, but they had the problem of priests developing families and wanting to pass on their parishes as a legacy. So they began to encourage priests not to marry. It would be better to fornicate, which relieved the problem for a while, but developed other problems. In Germany of the period, the word for bastard was translated as "parson's son".

Forgiveness was sometimes meted out to women for sexual favors, and advertisements in France and Spain for priests include the condition that they accept concubines in order to protect the women of the town.

At about the 13th Century though, begins the age of public repression, and the age of private perversion. Some argue that this repressive period won out because of the growing epidemic of syphilis. But repression brought with it sodomy, self-flagellation, even in the monasteries and convents a new devil began to appear. Incubus, in the masculine form, and succubus in the feminine form, were supernatural beings that were known to visit people in their beds, exciting sexual fantasies and convulsions. Stories were documented, eyewitness reports of actually seeing incubuses and succubuses. An incubus once was seen by a group of nuns when the Incubus had attacked the nun in her bed, and she screamed so loudly the other nuns came running. And there, under her bed, they found the incubus, who had taken the form of their bishop.

Sexual denial also caused a revival of ancient fertility religion, which the Church condemned as a rival religion, and because of its sexual basis, devil worship. The picture of the devil as we now have it, with horns and tail, comes from this period, the horns and tail referring to either the goat or the bull that were used as symbols in fertility religions.

The threat of the alternative religion was sufficient that Innocent the VIII declared an inquisition against witchcraft, which resulted in the killing of people who worshipped the horned god of fertility and also people who had unexplained diseases like epilepsy and people who engaged in magic. Explicitly though, the Inquisition was linked to repressing sexuality. Inquisition records show that women shocked their

inquisitors when they faced their death in execution proclaiming the pleasure and serenity of their religion without remorse. One inquisitor said, "All witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable."

Still, in the midst of severe repression, however, comes the seed of a second sexual revolution in the form of the Protestant Reformation. On one hand, they are very critical of the Church for not being more rigorous in sexual repression, but on the other hand, they make holy matrimony, rather than celibacy, the new ideal. Now sex must be confined to marriage, and this becomes the mission.

So there are new targets of repression. Prostitution and homosexuality and masturbation, which used to be the old outlet acceptable under the celibacy rule, become the new enemy. And prostitution, homosexuality and masturbation are severely repressed.

But into the 18th and 19th Centuries, the gap between public moral ideals and private practice widens. The ideal woman was regarded as someone who was sexless, but a baby-producer. Husbands and wives had sex with their clothes on. Female orgasm was grounds for divorce in the State of New York. Yet pornography and prostitution are rampant. This is the period of Fanny Hill. And 50 percent of women conceived their first child outside of wedlock.

What we have in these brief examples from history is unbridled passion versus repressive prudence: sex as an experience of God in orgies versus sexual denial in asceticism, the worship of fertility gods versus the Inquisition, unacceptability of sex outside of marriage versus the acceptability of sex only in matrimony. What connects the unbridled passion and repressive prudence is an obsession with sex. Sexual obsession takes the form of repression or promiscuity. Neither obsession has been able to win out. Prudence and passion must walk hand in hand. Societies and individuals need prudent standards for sexual expression, but also societies need to positively encourage appropriate sexual expression. The ideal to which both point, I believe, is sex as sacrament.

Let me develop this idea of sex as sacrament by making some brief statements about some current sexual issues like homosexuality, pornography,

promiscuity, birth control and abortion.

Homosexuality. It has always been part of the human experience as far as we know. Christianity has been harshly repressive only in recent centuries. Homosexuality arises out of a certain family dynamic, and now they suspect even a biological dynamic, and it's determined in early childhood. Homosexuals deserve the protection of law, with the same rights and respect as any individuals. However, homosexuality ought not to be advocated as superior to family life, upon which society is based. Nor should the violent, cruel and exploitive and promiscuous expressions among homosexuals go without criticism.

Pornography. The repression unleashed by decency campaigns can be more harmful than the pornography that it attempts to prevent. The attack on literature, science and civil rights in the name of decency does us more harm. Those who condemned pornography 100 years ago condemned Robinson Crusoe for encouraging adventurism. This year The Scarlet Letter has been attacked for preaching witchcraft, as has a Dick and Jane elementary reader because Dick stands at a stove in one of the pictures and Jane reads a book.

Human beings are born not knowing how to mate. Other animals have some helpful scent or a little tail that they wag and everybody knows exactly what to do and when to do it. Pornography, at its best, is sex education; pornography, at its worst, exploits the people involved in it and may depict sexual encounters which in reality are harmful. Pornography is bad not because it's sexually stimulating, but to the extent that it is bad education.

However, the heart of the matter is promiscuity. Pope John Paul II in 1981 was quoted and ridiculed in the press for saying that husbands who look at their wives with lust commit adultery in their hearts. Actually, he didn't say that. Actually what he said was "A husband commits adultery with his own wife if he treats her only as an object to satisfy his sexual instincts."

He was speaking out against a long-standing Catholic tradition called the marital rights of husbands. The evolution of the Church position progressed like this: At first there was no position on

sex matters; then sex was seen as a sin in or out of marriage; then St. Augustine claimed that sex was acceptable but only for procreation; finally, in Vatican II, marital sex is acceptable as a mutual expression of love.

This is a considerable evolution. The Pope's position is that erotic sex, expressed as a free exchange of love gifts in the context of marriage, is ideal. Where sex does not harm, it enhances both parties -- all people in society. This position brings the Church to a centralist position of sex as sacrament. The Pope stresses sexual intimacy is an experience of the spirit as well as the flesh. And I wonder if in literal terms, you agree -- whether the act of sex, when you have it, who you have it with, has an effect on your spirit, on your sense of yourself, on your sense of well-being. Is there not an effect on one's spirit as well as one's flesh from a sexual encounter?

What would it mean to us personally if we regarded sex as a sacrament? I think it would mean men and women learning to say yes and no to sexual feelings, without external constraints, with only internal constraints. It would require learning sexual discipline. What I mean by that is the ability to say no without making oneself totally repressed, that is, with the no becoming habitual, with our sexual feelings and perhaps our other feelings turned off. And I mean being able to say yes without indiscriminately acting out our sexual feelings. It means feeling sexual feelings, enjoying those feelings -- "Oh, my gracious, I'm having a sexual feeling. Isn't it wonderful?" -- without the fear of the urge to act out those sexual feelings, but being able to, with the right person at the right time, turn on those sexual feelings and act them out fully.

It would mean for singles giving up sex as a means of instant intimacy. Certainly sex is a quicker way of getting intimate with someone than going to dinner. But the intimacy, I think, and you can judge from your own experience, doesn't last. It blows the circuits of the relationships. There isn't enough communication and connection to handle such a step up in intimacy. So the instant intimacy doesn't build a relationship; it distances the relationship. It would mean recognizing that reality and being able to say no

to sexual impulses.

Sex as a symbolic expression of commitment and caring would become the ideal. It would mean using sex as a bonding experience. Sex as a sacrament would mean choosing to make sex matter, choosing to make it mean something, choosing to make sex special.

Sex as a sacrament would have to also be applied to marriage and family life. Big Momma in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" I think understood it pretty basically. She said, "When a marriage is on the rocks, the rocks are in the bed." Big Momma knew that the most powerful experience of sex is when you feel love for the one you're with. And the most powerful experience of love is in the sexual expression. Love and sex together is not an abstract ideal. Anyone who has felt love and sex together know that it is a powerful feeling that does affect the spirit.

Extramarital sex is an attempt to avoid loving the one you're with. It is a fear of feeling that intensity of our love-sex connection with our own spouse. And I think the longer you're married, the harder it is, because if you're married for a long time and you have that intense experience often and deeply, the loss that's going to come -- not from divorce necessarily but from death for sure -- the loss that's going to come from something so valued, so special, so unique to you, is going to be enormously painful. And the implications of having one's personality so linked to another personality can be a very frightening possibility. Extramarital sex is refusing to bring your passion home.

Eroticism, though, doesn't require a variety of partners. What it requires is daring to experience yourself in a variety of ways. When passion seeks outlets beyond the marriage, consequences set in. They affect you; they affect your lover; they affect your spouse; they affect your kids, your family, your friends and your society. Few bouts of passion last as long as the consequences do.

I notice that most people I know in second marriages seem wiser, more prudent and more attentive to each other.

Birth control represents the means by which

women can express themselves sexually and enjoy fully this spiritual bonding experience of sex. Controlling women has been the centuries-old weapon for sexual repression. Arguments against birth control claim that it supports promiscuity. Promiscuity, as I have said, must be addressed. But you cannot force people to stop being promiscuous. By denying birth control to some, it only penalizes the poor.

The abortion debate recognizes, though, that sex does have spiritual meaning. Respect for human life I think is not a slogan. It's a feeling that a woman and man get when they become aware that the woman is pregnant. If you can then think forward with some hope, you feel joy, maybe mixed with a little fear of responsibility, but if you can see no hope, then you feel no joy, just fear, and probably anger. Birth and abortion affect our sense of ourselves, our sense of our well-being, our sense of spirit. Abortions are not usually taken lightly because they do so affect us. It is spiritually better, I believe, to prevent pregnancy rather than to abort it. But the choice must be with the woman. Legislation can only hurt the poor.

If you don't agree with the things that I've said, be assured that I have no intention of making them laws. Sex as a sacrament I see as a spiritual and moral ideal. To enforce it by law would be impossible, first of all. It also would destroy the meaning of sex as sacrament. To make sex meaningful, one must individually make that choice in every individual moment.

Ideals are not rules. They're beacons. They light our way. They guide us to what we think is a quality life, a good life. When we step out of the light, we're not condemned. We simply have to step back into it. Sexual sin, though, I think is real. Sin means literally mistake. We pay consequences, materially and spiritually, for our sexual mistakes. Prevention of mistakes, though, is no excuse for repression. Mistakes are to be learned from. The only evil is being locked in a pattern that has been proven destructive, and yet you refuse to learn from it.

Modern liberalism -- Christian, Jewish and Humanist -- represents I think a new religious faith. In this new religion, there are standards and beliefs as strong as in the old. Social shame is replaced by

personal guilt. The belief in the evil nature transcended by faith is replaced by a faith in human nature. Obeying authority is replaced by trusting creativity and your own will to act rightly. Rewards and punishments are replaced by self-responsibility. Dogma becomes personal experience. Divine laws are replaced by personal values and standards. An outer god becomes an inner god.

The liberal-fundamentalist struggle in our generation challenges us to develop a higher morality which acknowledges both prudence and passion for ourselves and for everybody. I think it challenges us, here as a community, to articulate our values, to talk among ourselves, to be clear about what our values are, and to learn the discipline to be good disciples to our own ideals.

CLOSING WORDS

Closing words are from Felix Adler, the founder of the Ethical Society. This is from 1877. "If God in good and good in God be one, if there is no God save as he dawns on us in the act of doing good, then religion must teach people to know and do good for its own sake."

(This transcript was produced with the editorial assistance of Suzanne Parrish.)