

Chapter 4: To Thine Own Self Be False: Dissociation, Denial, and Dishonesty about Sex

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
—Shakespeare, “Hamlet”

Wherever there is secrecy, there is lying.
—Daniel Ellsberg¹

Only the fool can permanently neglect the conditions of his own nature.
In fact, this negligence is the best means of making him an instrument of evil.
—C. G. Jung²

How did Western culture develop such dysfunctional sexual values? This chapter approaches the question from a psychological perspective, while the next chapter will take a historical perspective.

If we reverse Shakespeare’s dictum and say, “To thine own self be false, and thou canst not be true to any other man,” we have a good description of how American society deals—or fails to deal—with sexuality. Most of our religious, cultural, and political leaders, as well as many ordinary people, are dishonest and hypocritical in dealing with sexuality. But in most cases, I don’t think they are consciously lying. My interpretation is that their dishonesty stems from the dissociation and denial caused by sexual abuse in all of its forms.

Dissociation: Disconnecting Feelings and Experiences from Thoughts

Dissociation is a compartmentalization of experience that often results from physical and emotional traumas, including sexual abuse. The symptoms of dissociation may include: (1) repression or amnesia regarding the experiences that were traumatizing; (2) mind-splitting, where the threatening experience is cut off from the rest of one’s thinking processes and not incorporated into them; (3) withdrawal of feeling, a blandness or rotteness in thought processes associated with the threatening experience; (4) loss of confidence in one’s own perceptions and feelings regarding these and similar experiences; confusion about good and bad, innocence and guilt.

When the trauma is sexual, dissociation distorts our thinking and feelings about sexuality: (1) We may repress or forget traumatic sexual experiences. (2) We cut off sexuality from our usual thinking processes and cling to irrational beliefs. (3) We split off our feelings about sex from our ideas about sex, denying feelings and experiences that contradict our beliefs. (4) We lose confidence in the validity of our own perceptions regarding sexuality.

Because shame suppresses activity in the brain’s neocortex, where rational thinking occurs, I suspect that people who suffer chronic sexual shame may be physically incapable of thinking clearly about sex. (It took me ten years after leaving the Catholic Church before I felt that I was just starting to think clearly about sex.) Unable to be honest with themselves about their own

sexuality, shame-bound people are unable to be honest about sexuality in general, and act in ways that avoid, obscure, and deny the truth.

The Denial of Childhood Sexuality

In public, most respectable Americans express irrational beliefs about children and sexuality. Sexual experience of any kind is assumed to be harmful to a child, despite the fact that children are sexual by nature and spontaneously experience sexual feelings throughout their lives. Masturbation is no longer believed to be physically harmful, but it is still regarded as morally dangerous, despite the fact that most people do it, even the most admired and virtuous. Any glimpse of a naked body is regarded as potentially harmful to children, despite the fact that privacy is a relatively recent invention; social nudity has been part of everyday life throughout human history and still is in many cultures. How could something as natural as seeing a human body possibly be harmful? And if seeing sexual activity is harmful to children, how did our ancient ancestors survive life on the African savanna, where there were no private rooms for sex play? Medical researcher K. E. Money sums up our current situation: “Most people know that young people benefit from early experience in other areas, such as muscular coordination, socializing, art, music, religion, and language, but no one seems to know that early experience with sex is beneficial.”³

The discrepancies between public beliefs and everyday experiences suggest that we have a culture-wide case of dissociation regarding sexuality. The problem begins with aversive sexual abuse, as I discussed in the last chapter. As children we are taught that our sexual interests and activities are dirty and wrong. That doesn't stop most children from pursuing sexual interests and activities, but it does teach us to keep sex hidden and to lie about it. In contrast, look at how toilet training, another important task of socialization, is treated: as toddlers we all learn to use the toilet, but we don't have to pretend that we don't do it; in fact, asking where the bathroom is in someone else's house is praised as a step toward becoming a big boy or girl. But when it comes to sex, children have to pretend that they don't do it. Identifying with the aggressor in the case of aversive sexual abuse means that children internalize their parents' negative attitudes toward sexual behavior. Children's sexual activities then become conflicted, fearful, guilty, and shame-filled, and lying about sex becomes the foundation of respectability. The result is a make-believe morality for public display that is completely disconnected from reality.

In make-believe morality, nobody masturbates. In reality, 95% of men and 89% of women have masturbated; 55% of men and 38% of women masturbate at least once a month.⁴ In make-believe morality, nobody engages in sexual activity with another person until marriage. In reality, only 7% of men and 21% of women had their first intercourse on their wedding night.⁵ In make-believe morality, abstinence means not engaging in sexual activity of any kind. In reality, more than a third of “virgin” male and female adolescents engage in mutual masturbation, oral or anal sex.⁶

In make-believe morality, religion prevents pre-marital sexual activity and homosexuality. In reality, religion does delay the onset of intercourse: among all twelfth graders, 61% have had intercourse, but only 31% of religious and 17% of very religious twelfth graders have had intercourse. Nevertheless, among religious eleventh and twelfth graders, 29% of the boys and

26% of the girls have had oral sex; 70% have fondled a partner's breasts and/or genitals; half have been nude with a member of the opposite sex; 89% of boys and 71% of girls masturbate; and almost all have kissed a member of the opposite sex. Among religiously active teenagers, 14% of boys and 11% of girls are either homosexual, bisexual, or unsure of their orientation.⁷

In make-believe morality, abstinence-only sex education delays the onset and frequency of intercourse; in reality, research shows that it does not.⁸ In make-believe morality, abstinence-only sex education prevents teenage pregnancies, but availability of contraceptives encourages sexual activity. In reality, teenagers throughout the developed world have similar rates of sexual activity, but America has a much higher rate of teenage pregnancy than countries that provide comprehensive sex education and make contraceptives available to everyone.⁹ In the Netherlands, where condoms are easily available from vending machines, fewer than 1% of fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds become pregnant each year.¹⁰

We cannot realistically evaluate the effectiveness of various methods of contraception and disease prevention unless we consider the actual failure rate of each method in everyday life.¹¹ For example, when used correctly, condoms break only 2% of the time; but in actual practice, condoms fail up to 14% of the time, not because of defects, but because of user error. Abstinence has to be evaluated in the same way. Abstinence is *not* 100% effective in preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, because many people who attempt abstinence do not achieve it. A study presented at the 2003 annual meeting of the American Psychological Society found that over 60% of college students who had pledged virginity during their middle or high school years had broken their vow to remain abstinent until marriage.¹² When you consider also that teens who are not planning to have sex are less likely to use contraceptives, it's clear that abstinence is much less effective than contraception. As Planned Parenthood president Faye Wattleton remarked, "Just saying no prevents teenage pregnancy the way 'Have a nice day' cures chronic depression."¹³

Instead of preparing children for intimacy and sexual relationships, make-believe morality tries to prevent all sexual behavior. Abstinence-only sex education programs give inaccurate information on topics like homosexuality, exaggerate the dangers of sexual activity, ignore the benefits of intimate physical and emotional contact, and withhold information that is crucial for preventing not just pregnancy, but also sexually transmitted diseases.¹⁴ The danger of this approach can be seen in the fact that 55% of religious teenagers erroneously believe that they cannot contract a disease from oral sex.¹⁵ They are not going to learn the truth if their educators do not discuss the full range of sexual practices.

A visitor from another culture might wonder, Why do American adults work so hard to hurt their children by withholding the information they need to make safe and responsible choices? The answer, I believe, is found in the dynamics of identifying with the aggressor. These dynamics are typically unconscious, but they have their own logic, and it goes like this: Adults do not want their children to experience the sexual shame that the parents themselves experienced as children. But because they identify with the aggressor, the adults blame themselves for that shame, as if they were thinking, "If only I had not been sexual, I would not have experienced that shame." And so, they tell their children, in effect, "Don't be sexual, and you won't feel ashamed." The flaw in this logic is that trying not to be sexual is what creates the shame in the

first place; but because this cognitive-emotional dynamic is unconscious, no one ever examines the logic of it. As a result, adults subject their children to aversive sexual abuse in order to protect them from the shame that comes from aversive sexual abuse—a self-defeating strategy.

Identifying with the aggressor can also take a darker turn if the adults were punished or humiliated for their sexual activities as children. These adults, now enjoying the position of power that their parents once had, may sadistically punish and humiliate their children—in effect, punishing the children for the sins of the grandparents. This is widely recognized by specialists in child abuse as a common dynamic in multi-generational abuse. Again, this dynamic is unconscious; the parents believe they are punishing the children for their own good.¹⁶

What is missing from both of the scenarios I have just described is empathy. The adults have no empathy for their own childhood experiences of sexual desire and shame, and so they are unable to empathize with their children's sexual experiences. The only way out of these harmful behavior patterns is to stop identifying with the aggressor, to admit that we were abused as children, and to begin developing empathy and compassion toward ourselves. This is a difficult step to take. How could our loving parents have abused us? We have to realize that child abuse is most often committed unconsciously by loving parents with no intention of harming the child. Love and abuse co-exist in the same parents. Once we accept this fact, we can begin our own healing process (see Chapter 7).

The Denial of Sexual Abuse

If most Americans are unable to acknowledge the emotional pain of their experience of aversive sexual abuse, it's no wonder that as a society we tend to deny even more heinous forms of sexual abuse such as child molestation, incest, and rape. In his article "Hidden Victims, Hidden Pain: Societal Avoidance of Child Sexual Abuse," psychologist Roland Summit tells the story of a popular small-town teacher and coach, "Mr. Friendly," who used his position of trust to sexually molest over a hundred boys. Here is my own summary of the story:

Mr. Friendly initiated into his sex club almost every fifth-grade boy in town over a period of four years. He used confidential information from school files to threaten the boys into silence. Everyone knew everyone else's business in this isolated community, but parents routinely disregarded clues that something improper was going on because of their respect and admiration for Mr. Friendly. When one mother finally believed her nine-year-old son's story of being stripped and orally raped in the club, she contacted the authorities. Police searched Mr. Friendly's classroom, where they found sexual devices and large numbers of still and motion pictures of Mr. Friendly having group sex with his students.

When Mr. Friendly was arrested, the cover-up became deliberate and punitive, despite the indisputable proof of molestation. Police officers prevented their own sons from being questioned. Only three boys were allowed by their families to testify against Mr. Friendly. A defense attorney planted a false story that a disgruntled clique of girls had falsely accused Mr. Friendly. Fellow teachers signed letters of support for the accused man. Three mental health specialists advised the court that Mr. Friendly should receive outpatient counseling but not be imprisoned so that he could continue contributing to the school and community. The therapists all agreed that the boys were willing participants in sex with Mr. Friendly, and that the teacher was not an active danger to children. The judge wisely overruled the "experts" and sentenced Mr. Friendly to a treatment facility for sex offenders.

The community sealed off the scandal with a wall of silence. Not a single boy was referred to the counseling program offered by the Mental Health Department. Five years later, a new high school

teacher commented to his colleagues about the strange behavior of his male students, who reminded him of little boys, giggling over bathroom humor and keeping their distance from girls. His fellow teachers dismissed his concern. No one mentioned Mr. Friendly or his legacy. Those in town who did remember the scandal trivialized it by saying, “Three boys, one of them a meddlesome outsider, had sex with a teacher some years back. Nothing to get too excited about.”¹⁷

Our society’s eagerness to deny sexual abuse can be seen in the controversy over repressed and recovered memories of sexual abuse. Nobody, to my knowledge, has any trouble accepting the fact that soldiers who suffer severe injuries in battle or people who survive serious accidents may suffer from amnesia and have no memory of the events surrounding the injury. Yet many people believe that it’s impossible to repress memories of traumatic sexual abuse and later recover them. This belief has been widely disseminated in the mass media as “false memory syndrome,” which one critic describes as “a sham invented by pedophiles and sexual abusers for the media.”¹⁸

The underlying assumption of the recovered memory skeptics seems to be that sexual abuse could not possibly be traumatic enough to trigger amnesia. But as we have seen, sexual abuse is an assault not just on one’s body, but on one’s identity as a person. The betrayal involved in sexual abuse is unbearable, and threats or violence may make the sexual abuse victim fear for his or her life. There is extensive documentation that sexual abuse is often, though not always, traumatic.¹⁹ And there is ample documentation of repressed memories of sexual abuse.²⁰ One of the most significant studies started with 17-year-old medical records of children who had suffered physical injuries from sexual abuse. The researchers located 129 of the now adult survivors and interviewed them. They found that 38% of the women had completely forgotten the abuse, and 10% had forgotten it at some time in the past.²¹

Traumatic memories and normal everyday memories are processed by different parts of the brain.²² Normal narrative memories are processed through the hippocampus. These memories can be distorted or manipulated, as shown in the well-publicized work of psychologist Elizabeth Loftus.²³ Traumatic memories, however, are processed through the limbic system of the brain and are stored as visual images, sensations, emotions, and behavioral states—“body memories” as opposed to narrative memories. Traumatic memories may be repressed to an unconscious level for the sake of survival and everyday functioning, but they are highly resistant to change—which is why recovery is so difficult—and they can be triggered as “flashbacks” by the right stimulus. When enough body memories are recovered, they may be consciously assembled into a narrative that “explains” what happened, although the details of that narrative may not be accurate.²⁴

I have never seen or heard a discussion of traumatic memory in the mass media, but I have frequently heard “false memory syndrome” presented as fact, despite a complete lack of scientific evidence that any such “syndrome” exists. A commentary in the Harvard Mental Health Letter concluded that comparisons of Loftus’s “implanted memories” with recovered memories of sexual abuse “fail to meet minimal standards of serious social research.”²⁵ But the mass media and the American public seem eager to accept any idea that minimizes the reality of sexual abuse.

The worst result of the secrecy imposed on all of children’s sexual experiences is that most incidents of child sexual abuse are kept secret and never reported to anyone. The secrecy of the abuse experience itself creates a powerful feeling of danger and fear, and perpetrators usually

warn their victims not to tell anyone. Even siblings are often unaware of abuse, as this letter to Ann Landers shows:

Last week my 32-year-old sister told me she had been sexually molested by our father from age 6 to 16. I was stunned because for 20 years I had kept the same secret from anyone. I am now 30. We decided to talk to our three other sisters, all in their 20's. It turned out that our father had sexually molested each and every one of us. We all thought we were being singled out for that humiliating, ugly experience, and were too ashamed and frightened to tell anyone, so we all kept our mouths shut. Father is now 53. To look at him, you would think he was the all-American dad.²⁶

The normal child's reaction is not to escape abuse but to survive it by accepting and adjusting to it. Abused children go into a kind of hypnotic trance, dissociating from the painful experience while complying automatically to the aggressor's every demand. Summit argues that sexual abuse continues unabated because we are a society of victims pretending not to be victims.²⁷ We live in a shared hypnotic trance, hallucinating that everything is fine.

Many psychologists and social commentators have noted the hypnotic qualities of charismatic leaders and the trance-like behavior of people who automatically obey authorities.²⁸ Child abuse of any kind makes people easier to hypnotize, more likely to support authoritarian political and religious movements, and more likely to support violence—ranging from capital punishment to war—as a solution to social problems.²⁹

From this viewpoint, we can see that the physical and sexual abuse of children actually protects the social and political status quo. Not only do abused children lose confidence in their own perceptions of reality, they are also conditioned to surrender their autonomy to authority figures. Thus child abuse provides a steady supply of suggestible and compliant followers to authoritarian politicians and churches. By ignoring child abuse, governments and churches protect their own power. Secular society pays lip service to religious sexual morality (and to religious morality in general) precisely because it is ineffective and will not threaten the social balance of power.

No conspiracy is required to make this happen; in fact, it's the *unconsciousness* of society's leaders that protects the status quo. Because leaders have not worked through the painful memories of their own abuse, they do not see the need to change social systems that encourage abuse. Society's denial of the realities of child abuse is a good example of how institutionalized evils perpetuate themselves without malicious intent on the part of individuals. As Jung said in the quotation opening this chapter, neglecting the conditions of our own nature can easily make us instruments of evil.

Traditional morality paints a totally unrealistic picture of human sexuality. Because this picture is presented as normative, but does not conform to anybody's actual experience, it casts a cloud of shame over all of our sexual experiences and makes it difficult for us to judge the validity of our perceptions. Universal sexual shame creates an ethos of denial, dishonesty, secrecy, and ignorance about sex. This ethos ensures that most sexual crimes will remain hidden, many will be unnamed and unrecognized, few will ever be reported, and hardly any will be punished.

Religious Dishonesty about Sex and Abuse

It's bad enough that our religions have traditionally ignored sexual abuse in their moral teachings, as we saw in Chapter 1, but much of what they say about sexuality and sexual morality in general is untrue. There is a wide chasm between what religious scholars and historians know to be true and what is typically preached from the pulpit, taught in Sunday school, and asserted in the mass media. Many clergy members preach dogmas that they don't personally believe—they think it's their job to do that. I know. I once did it myself.

As a Catholic deacon and candidate for the priesthood, I taught religion to a class of suburban seventh-graders. When the topic of sexuality came up in the lesson plan, I felt obliged to tell the students that the church considers masturbation to be sinful. I omitted the fact that I and many other church members did not agree with this teaching. The responses of two students illustrate the dangers of what I now call *religious correctness*—the political correctness of the soul. Eddie, a well-adjusted, bright, friendly boy, raised his hand and stated simply, "My parents [both educators] told me there's nothing wrong with masturbating." He's wasn't arguing with me, just trying to contribute to the discussion; he was the only class member who made a consistent effort to participate. Fred, a puny, depressed loner who was often picked on by other students and who came from a troubled family, raised his hand and asked in a halting voice, "Does that mean you'd go to hell?" I denied that masturbation would send a person to hell, but the damage was already done. The last thing this poor boy needed in his already difficult life was the idea that enjoying his own body could send him to hell. It was experiences like this that led me to conclude that religious and moral ideas can be intrinsically abusive.

Masturbation, though rarely discussed in public, is the most important issue in sexual morality. Joyful, loving masturbation is the foundation of a healthy sex life. As we saw in the last chapter, the avoidance of masturbation can result in serious sexual dysfunctions that could threaten the success of a marriage. And, as a non-marital, non-reproductive sexual activity, masturbation is clearly forbidden by traditional morality as a "sin against nature." But, despite official church teachings, the clergy rarely dare to condemn masturbation anymore, because today everyone knows they would be condemning most of the people in their congregations, as well as themselves.

By the time I was a deacon, I knew that hardly any priests or bishops believed that masturbation is a serious sin, which logically meant that they had rejected the basic principles of Catholic sexual morality, though few had the courage to admit it. In the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, there was great hope for change in the church. The mass protests of my generation had helped bring an end to the war in Vietnam, so I was optimistic that a mass movement of priests could change the church's teachings on sexuality. The Vatican could (and did) fire publicly dissenting theologians, but I didn't see how they could fire everyone.

Of course, that mass movement of the clergy never happened. My error was in underestimating the paralyzing power of shame. As a group of victims pretending not to be victims, priests are too ashamed of their own sexuality to think clearly about sexual morality or discuss it honestly in public, much less lead a movement to change the church's teachings. A bishop I know is fond of saying "Chastity never hurt anyone." That may be true of freely chosen chastity, but coerced chastity is a violation of bodily autonomy and a form of sexual abuse. I think this bishop is blind

to the damage done by coerced chastity because his thinking is dissociated from the emotional pain that coerced chastity has caused in his own life.

Acceptance of sexual abuse is a prerequisite for ordination to the priesthood in the Catholic Church, because mandatory celibacy is institutionalized sexual harassment. Once you realize that sexual abuse is about coercion, not sex, then it's clear that forcing people to surrender their sexual autonomy in order to get a job is sexual harassment, whether that surrender involves having sex with the boss or giving up your right to have sex at all. The Catholic Church selects its leaders in part for their insensitivity to violations of sexual autonomy.

It should be no surprise, then, that these leaders would cover up and deny the seriousness of priests molesting children, and that they would have so little empathy for the victims. Suppressing their own emotional pain makes it difficult for them to empathize with the pain of others. Shortly before he resigned because of his role in the pedophile priest scandals, Cardinal Bernard Law described his fellow bishops as "wounded healers." He was wrong. The bishops are wounded wounding. Until they heal their own sexual shame, church leaders will continue to impose this sickness of the soul on new generations of believers.

The Catholic Church is not unique in perpetuating the cycle of abuse: the same sexual shame paralyzes Protestant leaders as well. The churches themselves have become instruments of evil, teaching dogmas that promote the shaming of children's sexuality, which leads some of those children to eventually become perpetrators of sexual abuse.

After decades of observation, research, and reflection, I have come to the conclusion that the denial of sexual abuse in their own lives has made the defenders of traditional sexual morality systematically dishonest about human sexuality, the Bible, and the history of Christian teachings. Although it would take an entire book to fully elaborate this assertion, I will provide some key examples of that dishonesty in the next chapter. Here I would like to focus on the issue which, as I write these pages, is most prominent in public discussions about sexual morality, namely, homosexuality and gay marriage. What I find most striking in discussions about homosexuality is the discrepancy between what scholars know and what the public believes. In public debate, errors and misconceptions that have been thoroughly discredited by scholars are still accepted as universally acknowledged facts.

The most egregious of these errors is the idea that the Bible and Christian tradition have always condemned homosexuality. In fact, the idea of categorizing people by their dominant pattern of sexual desire is a very modern concept that cannot be found in the original languages of the Bible (despite the rigging of the evidence by English Bible translators) nor in the Christian tradition. The word "homosexual" was coined in 1869 by Hungarian writer Karl Maria Kertbeny, popularized by German psychologists, and introduced in English at the turn of the twentieth century. The word "heterosexual" was coined soon afterward as its opposite. Up until that time, there had never been a word in any language that meant exactly what "homosexual" means today. Projecting these modern concepts back into history is naïve and anachronistic and leads to false conclusions. The Bible and Christian tradition did not even recognize the existence of different sexual orientations, much less discuss the morality of expressing those orientations in

behavior. The Bible and tradition cannot give definitive answers on homosexuality because they never even asked the question.³⁰

All of the biblical texts cited by opponents of homosexuality support their position only through dubious interpretations. The story of Sodom, with its attempted gang rape, has no relevance to consensual sexual activity. The Old Testament book of Leviticus describes same-gender sex as *toevah*, often translated as “abomination” but more accurately translated as “unclean,” with connotations of idolatry and foreignness, as seen in the common biblical phrase *toevah ha-goyim*, “the uncleanness of the Gentiles.” The object of this condemnation is probably pagan temple prostitution, not same-sex love. But in any case, the ritual purity rules of Leviticus, while important to Orthodox Jews, have been ignored by Christians since the time of St. Paul. Other activities described by the Bible as *toevah* include eating pork, shellfish, or rabbit (Leviticus 11:3–10); having sex while a woman is menstruating (Leviticus 18:19); breeding hybrid animals (Leviticus 19:19); trimming your beard (Leviticus 19:27); and wearing clothing made of two different kinds of cloth (Leviticus 19:19).³¹

In writings attributed to St. Paul (I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1:10), two Greek words, *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai*, are often translated in modern English Bibles as excluding homosexuals from the kingdom of heaven. *Malakoi* is a common word meaning “soft”; in a moral context, it means “licentious” or “lacking in self-control.” There is no reason to think this word points to homosexuals; in fact, from the Middle Ages to the early twentieth century, most Christian moralists associated *malakoi* with masturbation. *Arsenokoitai*—literally “male beds”—is a term of vulgar slang, rare in written texts, whose meaning in St. Paul’s time is far from certain but probably referred to male prostitutes. After the fourth century, *arsenokoitai* was used to describe a variety of disapproved sexual activities, including sodomy.

Finally, we are left with Romans 1:26–27, which describes one result of the Gentiles’ rejection of monotheism: “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” In this passage, Paul is clearly not describing homosexual orientation, but rather homosexual acts committed by heterosexual persons. As historian John Boswell points out, “It would completely undermine the thrust of the argument if the persons in question were not ‘naturally’ inclined to the opposite sex in the same way they were ‘naturally’ inclined to monotheism.”³² Commenting on this passage, St. John Chrysostom said, “Only those possessing something can change it.”³³ Homosexuals who were never inclined toward heterosexual intercourse in the first place can hardly be described as having exchanged or given it up.

It is also important to note that Paul described the behavior in question as degrading and shameful, but not as sinful. Paul agreed with his Roman Jewish audience that the widespread homosexual behavior in Gentile culture was disgusting, but that does not mean that he regarded the behavior itself as sinful. As we will see in Chapter 5, Jesus and Paul did not equate physical impurity with sin, and Paul refused to impose Jewish purity standards on Gentiles. If you read the quoted passage from Romans in context, it is just a detail in a larger argument, which biblical scholar William Countryman summarizes like this: “We all know Gentiles have sinned. Only

look at the dirtiness into which God plunged them as a consequence. But what of the Jew who criticizes them? Are you claiming to be sinless?"³⁴

In short, the common statement that the Bible clearly condemns homosexuality is not a fact but a highly disputed opinion, an opinion most often held by people who have not examined all the evidence.

As for the Christian tradition, what it has traditionally condemned is not homosexuality but sodomy, defined as oral or anal intercourse. Sodomy was not traditionally determined by the gender of one's sexual partner but by the orifices involved in sexual gratification. Recent surveys have found that from 70% to 90% of heterosexual couples have engaged in oral sex, and more than 20% of heterosexuals have engaged in anal sex.³⁵ So it is likely that heterosexuals, not homosexuals, are responsible for most acts of sodomy committed in America on any given night, and the churches' criticism of homosexuals is blatantly hypocritical. The online satirical weekly *The Onion* is one of the few mass-media publications that cut through the rhetoric about same-sex marriages to the core issue: "Homosexuals are just trying to make their sodomy as morally acceptable as the sodomy I enjoy in my church-sanctioned marriage."³⁶

With all the attention focused on the relationships of gay and lesbian adults, few people realize that the principal victims of anti-gay rhetoric and policies are children. A survey conducted by the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) found that 78 percent of teenagers had witnessed anti-gay harassment; 93 percent hear anti-gay slurs occasionally, with 51 percent hearing them every day.³⁷ A ten-day survey conducted by students at five different schools in Des Moines, Iowa, found that the average high school student hears about 25 anti-gay remarks a day.³⁸ Three out of four students targeted for harassment are actually heterosexual, but nearly all lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth experience harassment. Verbal harassment profoundly damages self-esteem and increases rates of depression, alcohol and drug use, suicidal thoughts and actions, anxiety disorders, isolation, and declines in academic performance. But the problem does not end there. A Human Rights Watch study found that lesbian and gay students in America are more likely than others to be victims of sexual harassment and physical or sexual assault.³⁹ In most cases, schools have done nothing to protect these students, although lawsuits against the schools are beginning to change school policies on harassment.

People who oppose equal civil rights for gays and lesbians are actually promoting the emotional and physical abuse of children, because legal discrimination knows no age barriers. How can we tell children to stop harassing sexual minorities when they know that adults can do it legally? We can't hold children to a higher standard of morality than adults.

Attacking the morality of homosexuals is part of the long Christian tradition of condemning consensual pleasure while ignoring sexual abuse. But what astonishes me more than the dishonesty and hypocrisy of conservative Christians is the silence of liberal Christians who let them get away with it. Why are liberal Christians so afraid to publicly criticize conservatives for their abusive teachings on sexuality? Part of the reason may be our cultural reluctance to criticize sexual abuse in its "traditional" forms, such as infant circumcision, the suppression of children's sexuality, and discrimination against homosexuals. But I think the deeper reason is that liberals

have not broken through their denial about their own experience of aversive sexual abuse; they have not worked through their feelings about it nor healed their own sexual shame.

Shame can be morally, as well as emotionally, crippling. It can leave us unable to assert the validity of our own experiences and insights, and unable to stand up for what we know is right. Breaking the cycle of sexual denial and dishonesty will require that people acknowledge the extent to which they have been sexually abused, begin the healing process, and speak the truth of their own experience, rather than conforming to political and religious correctness.

Our society's unwillingness to deal with the sexual traumas of children, and of our own childhood, is part of a more general unwillingness to deal with any of the physical and emotional traumas of children. Pastoral psychologist Donald Capps suggests that the Christian doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus may contribute to a lack of empathy for the traumas of children.⁴⁰ Accepting an interpretation of historical evidence that Jesus was probably conceived illegitimately when his teenage mother was raped,⁴¹ Capps surmises that the child Jesus suffered deeply from the stigma of illegitimacy:

The idea of the virginal conception of Jesus stretches a veil of secrecy or denial over the actual circumstances of Jesus's conception, thus denying the childhood traumas that Jesus himself experienced, and therefore creating a religious ethos in which the traumas of children are not taken seriously....

For children who are the victims of abuse, and adults who were abused as children, this concept effectively eliminates Jesus as a sympathetic figure, a sufferer in common, since the fact of his own victimization by a parent (that is, his natural father) is swept aside and categorically denied. For adults, abused or not, who continue to accept this idea as true, or who, while doubting it, continue to take a tolerant attitude toward it, viewing it as a benign or even beautiful idea, this view of Jesus's conception is an invitation to ignore childhood trauma, to treat it as something that simply does not happen.... Thus, in much the same way that ... Freud's oedipal theory throws a protective shield over abusive parents by viewing the child as the instigator of aggression and sexual perversity, so does the virginal conception of Jesus spare adults from having to consider the fact that the child Jesus (and the child Mary) suffered terribly due to the irresponsible actions of an adult. Thus, if these childhood sufferings can be so easily wished away, why expect that adults' attitudes toward the victimization of children today would be any different? The idea of the virginal conception of Jesus desensitizes adults so that they fail to hear the cries of children in their own midst, and the crying child within.⁴²

Jesus creatively overcame the shame of illegitimacy through his religious experience of God as an affectionate, loving father. This concept of God is the core of Jesus' teaching. Biblical scholars realized decades ago that the Aramaic language had no formal word for father; "Abba," the word Jesus used to begin the Lord's Prayer, is more accurately rendered by the intimate "Papa" or "Daddy."⁴³ But I'm unaware of any denomination that has adopted the correct translation in its official prayers. Are modern Christians too ashamed of themselves to dare this level of intimacy with God?

In contrast to Jesus' concept of God as a loving father, the most common Christian theology of atonement depicts God, in effect, as an abusive father, although it justifies his actions. First God punishes all of us for something we didn't do—original sin. The human race then owes a debt to God that we can't repay. But instead of forgiving the debt, as you might expect a loving father would do, God sends his innocent son to be tortured and killed to repay the debt. Many non-Christians, as well as a growing number of Christians, see nothing plausible in this scenario.

Why do so many people believe it? Because it replays the dynamics of the childhood abuse they have internalized and failed to heal. Acceptance of abuse, not healing and prevention of abuse, is at the core of much of traditional Christian theology and practice.⁴⁴

The Silence of Scientists

Science has made little progress in dispelling cultural myths about sexuality—not just because churches and other social institutions are resistant to change, but because relatively few scientists engage in basic research on human sexuality, and even fewer have made any effort to influence public opinion. Religious and political leaders are rarely challenged when they disguise moral judgments about sexual behavior with psychological terms such as *abnormal*, *immature*, *neurotic*, or *unhealthy*, even though there is often no scientific research to support such judgments.⁴⁵ Even the American Medical Association's 1972 book *Human Sexuality* unapologetically states, "What is 'healthy' or 'unhealthy' is usually decided on social and moral rather than on scientific grounds."⁴⁶ Can you imagine the AMA applying that statement to something like blood pressure? When scientific methods are abandoned or ignored on issues of sexual health, the scientific community quietly acquiesces.

Why does public discussion of sexuality turn so many scientists into cowards? Publicly challenging traditional morality makes a scientist vulnerable to charges of immorality and can ruin his social respectability, in the same way that sexual indiscretions can hurt a politician's electability. A scientist who honestly discusses behaviors that deviate from the social norm without condemning them is considered a danger to society by many people. His academic position or funding may be endangered. Religious conservatives have often challenged and sometimes ended government and foundation funding of research into sexuality. These combined pressures have resulted in a shortage of basic scientific research into human sexuality, particularly children's sexual development.

As respectable people, scientists do not want to offend mainstream religious beliefs. Respecting those beliefs is one of the criteria of respectability, and it's certainly better than killing each other over religious differences. But isn't there something wrong with a society—or even a religion—in which beliefs get more respect than knowledge?

People tend to equate knowledge with science and beliefs with religion, but in fact, knowledge and beliefs exist in both realms. The reason science generally works better than religion is that scientists have their priorities right: knowledge always takes precedence over beliefs, so that theories are rejected when evidence contradicts them.

There is knowledge as well as belief in the religious realm: knowledge of one's own soul, religious experiences, shared knowledge of the results that come from religious practices. Indeed, personal knowledge is the foundation of all knowledge, even of scientific discoveries.⁴⁷ But just as political correctness values ideological purity over real-world results, so does religious correctness value orthodox beliefs over personal experience and religious results such as spiritual liberation and healing, growth in empathy and compassion, and the experience of deep connection with God, others, nature, and self. Conflicts between knowledge and beliefs are

not just conflicts between science and religion; at a deeper level they are, I think, conflicts between authentic and corrupt religion, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

¹ Quoted by Donald L. Nathanson, "Understanding What Is Hidden: Shame in Sexual Abuse," *Psychiatric Clinics of North America* 12(2): 381–411 (1989).

² C. G. Jung, *The Undiscovered Self* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957), pp. 96–97.

³ K. E. Money, "Physical Damage Caused by Sexual Deprivation in Girls," *Medical Hypotheses* 4: 141–148 (1978).

⁴ Samuel S. Janus and Cynthia L. Janus, *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior* (New York: Wiley, 1993).

⁵ E. Laumann et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality—Sexual Practices in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁶ M. A. Schuster et al., "The Sexual Practices of Adolescent Virgins: Genital Sexual Activities of High School Students Who Have Never Had Vaginal Intercourse," *American Journal of Public Health* 86(11): 1570–76 (1996).

⁷ Steve Clapp, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak, *Faith Matters: Teenagers, Sexuality, and Religion* (Fort Wayne, Ind.: Christian Community, Inc., 2003).

⁸ D. Kirby, *No Easy Answers: Research Findings on Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy* (Washington, D.C.: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 1997).

⁹ Ira L. Reiss with Harriet M. Reiss, *An End to Shame: Shaping Our Next Sexual Revolution* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1990).

¹⁰ Reuters Health/London, "Teen Pregnancy 'Virtually Eliminated' in the Netherlands," March 2, 2001.

¹¹ Reiss, *An End to Shame*.

¹² Cynthia Dailard, "Understanding 'Abstinence': Implications for Individuals, Programs and Policies," *The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy*, December 2003, pp. 4–6.

¹³ Faye Wattleton, "The Case for National Action," *The Nation*, July 24, 1989, p. 140.

¹⁴ Judith Levine, *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

¹⁵ Clapp et al., *Faith Matters*.

¹⁶ Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1983).

¹⁷ Paraphrased from Roland C. Summit, "Hidden Victims, Hidden Pain: Societal Avoidance of Child Sexual Abuse," in Gail Elizabeth Wyatt and Gloria Johnson Powell, eds., *Lasting Effects of Child Sexual Abuse* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1988).

¹⁸ Robert B. Rockwell, "One Psychiatrist's View of Satanic Ritual Abuse," *Journal of Psychohistory* 21(4): 443–460 (1994)

¹⁹ There is a common misconception that marital or date rape is less traumatic than rape by a stranger, but at least one study has found it to be more traumatic, in both physical injuries and psychological consequences: see Dean G. Kilpatrick, Connie L. Best, Benjamin E. Saunders, and Lois J. Veronen, "Rape in Marriage and in Dating Relationships: How Bad Is It for Mental Health?" in Robert A. Prentky and Vernon L. Quinsey, eds., *Human Sexual Aggression: Current Perspectives*, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, vol. 528 (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1988). See also Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom, *Rape: Victims of Crisis* (Bowie, Md.: Robert J. Brady Co., 1974). Children have a better chance of not being traumatized by abuse: about one-third of child sexual abuse victims do not suffer any serious symptoms. If the abuse is less severe, if the child has a strong ego, if the family is supportive, and if the child receives early treatment, the adverse effects of sexual abuse can be minimized. See David Finkelhor, Sharon Araji, Larry Baron, Angela Browne, Stefanie Doyle Peters, and Gail Elizabeth Wyatt, eds., *A Sourcebook on Child Sexual Abuse* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986).

²⁰ Charles L. Whitfield, "How Common Is Traumatic Forgetting?" *Journal of Psychohistory* 23(2): 119–130 (1995); Charles L. Whitfield, *Memory and Abuse: Remembering and Healing the Effects of Trauma* (Deerfield Beach, Florida: Health Communications, 1995).

- ²¹ L. M. Williams, "Recovered Memories of Abuse in Women with Documented Child Sexual Victimization Histories," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 8(4): 649–73 (1995).
- ²² Bessel A. Van der Kolk, "Trauma, Affects, and the Brain," in S. L. Ablon et al., eds., *Human Feelings: Explorations in Affect Development and Meaning* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Analytic Press, 1993); B. A. van der Kolk and W. Kadish, "Amnesia, Dissociation, and the Return of the Repressed," in B. A. van der Kolk (ed.), *Psychological Trauma* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, Inc., 1987).
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- ²⁴ B. A. Van der Kolk and R. Fisler, "Dissociation and the Fragmentary Nature of Traumatic Memories: Overview and Exploratory Study," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 8(4): 505–525 (1995).
- ²⁵ Judith L. Herman and Mary Harvey, "The False Memory Debate: Social Science or Social Backlash?" *Harvard Mental Health Letter* 9(10) (April 1993).
- ²⁶ Ann Landers, *Field Syndicate*, May 21, 1980; quoted in *Summit* 1983:184.
- ²⁷ Roland C. Summit, "Hidden Victims, Hidden Pain"; see also Roland C. Summit, "The Child Sexual Abuse Accommodation Syndrome," *Child Abuse and Neglect* 7: 177–193 (1983).
- ²⁸ Joe Berghold, "The Social Trance: Psychological Obstacles to Progress in History," *Journal of Psychohistory* 19(2): 221–243 (1991).
- ²⁹ Michael A. Milburn and S. D. Conrad, "The Politics of Denial," *Journal of Psychohistory* 23(3): 238–251 (1996).
- ³⁰ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Boswell's exhaustive linguistic and historical analysis of biblical texts allegedly relating to homosexuality is my primary source for this discussion.
- ³¹ Some Christians argue that because Leviticus invokes the death penalty for same-gender sex, it must be a serious moral offense, not just a purity violation. This argument ignores other biblical invocations of the death penalty for acts that are clearly religious, not moral, violations, such as following or proselytizing for another religion (Exodus 22:20 and Deuteronomy 13:1–10), blasphemy (Leviticus 24:16), working on the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2), failure of a man to be circumcised (Genesis 17:14), eating leavened bread during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:15), engaging in ritual animal sacrifices other than at the temple (Leviticus 17:1–9), consuming blood (Leviticus 17:10), eating peace offerings while ritually unclean (Leviticus 7:20), waiting too long before consuming sacrifices (Leviticus 19:5–8), going to the temple in an unclean state (Numbers 19:13), manufacturing anointing oil (Exodus 30:33), entering the tabernacle if you're a stranger (Numbers 1:51), or communicating with the dead (Leviticus 20:27). The Bible also prescribes the death penalty for many moral offenses that modern people would not consider that serious, including pre-marital sex if you're a woman (the penalty did not apply to men) (Deuteronomy 22:13–21), cursing or abusing one's parents (Exodus 21:15–17), stubbornness and rebellion against one's parents (Deuteronomy 21:18–21), failure to control a dangerous animal (Exodus 21:29), ignoring the decision of a priest or judge (Deuteronomy 17:12), perjury (Deuteronomy 19:15–21), and gluttony and excessive drinking (Deuteronomy 21:20).
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 109.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ L. William Countryman, *Dirt, Greed, and Sex: Sexual Ethics in the New Testament and Their Implications for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 123.
- ³⁵ Laumann et al., *The Social Organization of Sexuality*; P. Blumstein and P. Schwartz, *American Couples* (New York: Morrow, 1983).
- ³⁶ *The Onion*, May 3, 2000; <http://www.theonion.com>.
- ³⁷ "What Does Gay Mean?" *Teen Survey*, National Mental Health Association, December 12, 2002; <http://www.nmha.org/whatdoesgaymean/WhatDoesGayMeanTeenSurvey.pdf>.
- ³⁸ Kellye Carter, "Gay Slurs Abound, Students Say," *Des Moines Register*, March 7, 1997; <http://www.youth.org/loco/PERSONProject/Alerts/States/Iowa/slurs.html>.
- ³⁹ Michael Bochenek and A. Widney Brown, *Hatred in the Hallways: Violence and Discrimination against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students in U.S. Schools* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001); <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/uslgbt/toc.htm>.
- ⁴⁰ Capps 1992.

⁴¹Schaberg 1987; Smith 1978:46–49.

⁴²Capps 1992:10–12.

⁴³ Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967).

⁴⁴ Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds., *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1989); Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1998).

⁴⁵Myers 1981.

⁴⁶Quoted in Myers 1981.

⁴⁷ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).