

Chapter 5

Spirit against Body: Why Traditional Sexual Morality Is Irreligious (synopsis)

This chapter provides a quick overview of the history of sexuality in the West, with particular emphasis on the Bible and Christian traditions, to show how our unrealistic ideas about sexuality developed. Sexual abuse of children was ubiquitous in the ancient world; the resulting shame, combined with the naive rationalism of ancient philosophers, gave rise to simplistic and inaccurate ideas about sex that became the shaky foundation of a Western sexual ethic based on avoidance of physical pleasure. Two parallel ethics developed: a religious ethic that said sexual pleasure is shameful except for reproduction in marriage, and a secular ethic that said sexual pleasure is shameful except in romantic love. Both ethics ignore the reality of sexual abuse, and neither provides an adequate foundation for understanding and nurturing the sexual development of children, who have sexual feelings but are not ready for romance or marriage.

The chapter discusses the sexual property ethic and purity ethic of the Old Testament, and Jesus' radical departure from these norms. For Jesus, physical purity was insignificant; purity of heart was what he demanded of his followers. Jesus also overturned the family as the center of society, treating the voluntary association of his followers as a stronger bond than kinship. He overturned the social hierarchy by giving children and the poor the highest place in his kingdom. In his treatment of women and children and his teachings on divorce and adultery, Jesus repudiated the traditional patriarchal property ethic. He taught that everyone is equal and all belong to God; this teaching is the seed of the modern concept of personal autonomy, which is the basis for condemning sexual abuse. However, the teachings of Jesus were so far ahead of his time that his followers were unable to grasp them fully. In the pastoral epistles we can see the early church already backsliding toward the patriarchal property ethic to maintain social respectability.

Christianity eventually developed its own radical purity ethic, which is fundamentally hostile to sexuality. This ethic is irreligious for several reasons:

1. It is based on a materialistic, reductionistic conception of sexuality.
2. The religious response to nature, exemplified in the Psalms, is wonder and gratitude; but traditional morality's response to sexual pleasure is not wonder and gratitude, but fear, guilt, and shame. Sexual pleasure is the only gift of God that Christians do not give thanks for in their official prayers.
3. Authentic religion expands and deepens the meaning of life. In contrast, traditional morality artificially restricts the meaning of sexuality to marriage and reproduction, treating most sexual experiences as meaningless.
4. Religion and sexuality are both about connection; but excessive sexual shame isolates people from others, alienates them from their own bodies and feelings, and limits their ability to experience God's love. Unconditional love begins with unconditional love of the body.

5. Authentic religion is about the truths that set us free. But the shame imposed by traditional sexual morality promotes dishonesty about sex in both our personal and social lives.
6. Looked at in its historical and social context, traditional sexual morality is often more concerned with social status than with religious values.
7. Traditional morality ignores the possibility of eros as a path to self-knowledge, spiritual awareness, and healing.

The chapter suggests that when ancient writers talked about the struggle between body and spirit, which they erroneously assumed to be a universal problem of human nature, they were actually describing a symptom of dissociation caused by sexual, physical, and emotional abuse. The incorporation of the body-spirit conflict into Christian teaching became a self-fulfilling prophecy, promoting ongoing abuse and dissociation, and robbing sexuality of its soul. Christianity's failure to accept human sexuality as it is, in its multiple dimensions, prevents its socialization, resulting in sexual abuse. As Carl Jung said, "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."

The chapter concludes by emphasizing that early Christian attitudes toward the body and sexuality were complex, diverse, and closely tied to local social conditions and concerns. While some Christians were becoming increasingly anxious about their sexuality, other were being baptized naked in public, proud and shameless; Christians of both sexes were relaxing, socializing, and exercising in the nude at public baths; Christians in Antioch were enjoying the dancing of naked women in the fountains at theaters; and Christian marriages were being celebrated, not in church, but in public processions featuring erotic songs and dances—priests were rarely invited, and those who came were advised to leave early.

"Last week, Vermont became the first state to legally recognize same-sex marriages. What do *you* think about this historic legislation?" ...

"Homosexuals are just trying to make their sodomy as morally acceptable as the sodomy I enjoy in my church-sanctioned marriage." —*The Onion*, May 3, 2000.