

## Civilizing Sexuality

### Introduction: The Emperor Is Naked

As a child, you probably heard or read Hans Christian Andersen's story "The Emperor's New Clothes." In that story, some bold con artists sell a vain emperor a new set of clothes made of the most beautiful and expensive cloth in the world, cloth so fine and magical that fools can't even see it. The cloth doesn't really exist, but the emperor's courtiers, unwilling to look like fools, marvel at the cloth's amazing colors and patterns, and the emperor himself won't admit that he can't see the cloth. So the emperor goes out in a grand procession, naked, to show off his new clothes. Word of his new wardrobe has preceded him, and everyone in the crowd compliments the emperor on the beauty of his new clothes. Only a little child in the crowd is able to trust his senses and tell the truth—the emperor is naked. Soon whispers spread through the crowd that the emperor is naked. The whispers then turn to shouts. But the emperor must save face, and he continues walking grandly, proud and naked in his procession.

As I begin writing this book, I feel like the child in that crowd. Like the fairy tale, this book deals with the intimacy of the human body, and with issues of social status, shame, deception, and honesty. I'm going to say things that I've never heard anyone say before (at least in public), things that some people may find shocking or offensive or embarrassing, things that contradict what many of our social leaders say about sex. In effect, I will proclaim that the guardians of moral respectability in our society are naked. And I will invite you, the reader, to trust your senses and tell the truth as you see it, regardless of what everyone around you is saying.

#### The Origins of This Book

This book is the culmination of a lifelong effort to understand my own sexuality. I grew up in a devout and prudish Catholic family, where I learned at an early age that the body is shameful and that sexual feelings and behaviors are shameful. I went to a Catholic elementary school, where I was taught that any willful sexual pleasure outside of reproduction in marriage is sinful. I went through high school, college, and graduate school in seminaries and was ordained a diocesan priest. Nothing that I was taught helped me make any sense of my sexual feelings, which had nothing to do with marriage and reproduction.

During my seminary years, I gradually discovered that hardly any priests actually believe the church's teachings on sexual morality. Masturbation is the litmus test. If all deliberate, non-marital, non-reproductive sexual pleasure is sinful, then logically masturbation must be considered a serious sin. But almost none of the clergy accept this conclusion, so I had to wonder how they could claim to believe the principles that it is based on. "Why do priests lie about sex?" became one of the central questions of my life. Looking for the answer to this question, and more broadly for a sexual morality that made rational sense, led me to decades of reading and thinking about sex—its biology, history, psychology, sociology, and ethics.

Feminist philosophy made a key contribution to my thinking with the concept that rape and other acts of sexual abuse are abuses of power, not abuses of pleasure. It's the coercion that makes sexual abuse harmful and wrong, as psychological studies have confirmed. Eventually another question occurred to me: If it's abusive to force someone to have sex, isn't it also abusive to force someone to avoid sex? A therapist friend of mine answered yes. This concept, that it's abusive to force someone to avoid sexual activity, is the seed out of which this book grew.

The next stage in the development of my thinking started with a random act of kindness, when a friend gave me a magazine article on shame that he thought I might be interested in. I was more than interested. This was the key piece of the puzzle, and finding it made everything else fall into place. The article surveyed the broad range of deep psychological damage that can be caused by excessive shame. I thought immediately of the profound sexual shame caused by traditional moral teachings. “This is it,” I thought, “the smoking gun!” Toxic shame is the reason why sexual coercion is harmful, whether it’s forcing people into sex or away from it.

Having left the priesthood after only two years for the freedom to practice a more open-minded, pragmatic kind of religion, and after spending a few more years in graduate school studying comparative mysticism and religion, I was now working as a technical and science writer. But the article on shame inspired me to take a year off from my work in order to delve into the scientific literature to find out what has been discovered about the psychological and social effects of traditional sexual morality.

I expected to discover a lot of studies showing that traditional morality contributes to sexual dysfunctions. There were some case studies describing this effect in the annals of sex therapists, but it was a question that surprisingly had not been explored in any statistical studies that I could find. What I did find, however, was an even bigger surprise—more than a hundred clinical and empirical studies, spanning five decades and involving more than 35,000 subjects, showed correlations between traditional moral and social values and rape, incest, and child molestation.

In science, of course, correlation does not necessarily equal causality. But after delving deeper into the psychology of abuse, the psychology of shame, and studies of both normal and abnormal childhood sexual development, I gradually came to the conclusion that there is a circular causality. Traditional morality, when it interferes with children’s normal sexual development, can be a contributing factor in sexual abuse; and sexual abuse, I concluded, is one of the principal causes of traditional sexual morality. If that last statement doesn’t make immediate sense to you, don’t worry. The dynamics of this vicious circle are complex and subtle, and much of this book will be devoted to describing in detail how they work.

During the time I was haunting obscure aisles of university libraries, I was also pursuing a second, more personal line of research. Our own personal experiences obviously have a major impact on how we think about sexuality, and I wanted to understand in detail how my experiences had affected my thinking. So I joined a small, intensive therapy group for men who had survived childhood sexual abuse. I had not been physically molested as a child, but my theory told me I should be in that group, and there I discovered that my psychological wounds and the social dysfunctionality of my childhood were just as severe as those suffered by men who had been physically molested as boys. This realization led me to develop the concept of non-contact sexual abuse which you will read about in this book.

The group therapy was healing and liberating, and it taught me a lot about the dynamics of toxic shame, validating what I was reading in psychological studies. My next step in reclaiming my sexuality involved, over the course of several years, many intensive workshops on sexuality, intimacy, and erotic spirituality. In addition to helping me heal my own emotional and spiritual wounds, these workshops gave me opportunities to hear hundreds of people talk about their sexual histories and experiences, both positive and negative. The new sexual ethic that I outline in this book comes directly from what I learned in these workshops about what works and what

doesn't work in sexual relationships. These shared experiences are also the source of my ideas on erotic friendships, intimacy education, erotic community, and erotic spirituality.

### **An Overview of This Book**

In Part 1, "A Culture of Sexual Abuse," I will survey our society's current situation and how we got here. I view sexual abuse as a social and cultural problem because sexual aggression comes from a failure to socialize sexuality—and American society does everything in its power to prevent the healthy socialization of children's sexuality. Over the past few decades, Americans have become more aware sexual abuse, and historical studies show that it is not a new phenomenon. I will discuss how our traditional morality has contributed to the problem by ignoring sexual abuse. I will summarize and interpret the scientific research showing that rapists, child molesters, and incestuous parents tend to have conservative moral and social values.

I will argue that the sexual abuse of children is an exaggeration of prevailing social norms but not a departure from them—American children routinely suffer from adult domination and humiliation of their sexuality. The assaults are usually psychological rather than physical, but the results are similar. Adults' prevention and punishment of children's normal sexual developmental activities, and adults' failure to provide adequate and realistic moral guidance for emerging sexual behaviors, are serious forms of abuse, which I call *non-contact sexual abuse*. I regard non-contact sexual abuse as the source of the pervasive sexual shame in our society. I will examine the dynamics of shame and its consequences, which range from denial and dishonesty about sex, particularly about children's sexuality, to sexual aggression. Part 1 ends with a discussion of how our religious and moral traditions have been corrupted by sexual abuse. In this discussion, I will present evidence that traditional sexual morality is intrinsically irreligious.

Part 2, "Healthy Sexuality," offers a vision of what sexuality can be when we embrace it rather than denying and suppressing it. I will present the results of scientific studies of childhood sexual development which show that the early years, from birth to age eight or nine, are the most important years for the psychological and social development of sexuality. Puberty should be considered the end, not the beginning, of childhood sexual development. I will introduce a new concept—*erotic friendship*—which epitomizes the kind of experience children need for healthy sexual development. Erotic friendships are the primary means through which sexuality is socialized. I will discuss the harm that is done when adults suppress or interfere with children's sexual development; the consequences range from sexual dysfunctions and perversions to difficulties in establishing loving relationships.

If we want to make our society safe for children's sexual development, our first priority must be to heal the sexual shame of adults, so I will provide an overview of how we can heal the wounds of sexual shame and abuse. Healing sexual shame involves reclaiming the meaningfulness of our positive sexual experiences; therefore, society needs to validate the wide variety of meanings that sexuality has in human life, not just romance, marriage, and reproduction. Cultivating healthy sexuality also means treating sexuality with wonder and gratitude—the authentic religious response to nature. This positive attitude allows us to honor the body, soul, and spirit in sexuality, and even to use sexuality as a path to spiritual growth and healing.

The title of the book and of Part 3, "Civilizing Sexuality," has a double meaning. It challenges us to integrate sexuality into society and culture, not just by civilizing our sexual behavior but also by honoring the civilizing power of sexuality. In Part 3 I will propose a new sexual ethic based

on autonomy, responsibility, and respect for both desires and boundaries. This ethic considers self-esteem and pleasure to be as important to morality as shame and guilt. I will discuss intimacy education as the key to breaking the cycle of sexual abuse. Intimacy education is experiential and involves learning the skills we need to achieve responsible, mutually satisfying, intimate relationships. Finally, I will present a vision of *erotic community*, a society where sexuality has been fully integrated into everyday life; where the sexuality of every child, teenager, and adult is honored and respected; and where the dominant attitudes toward sexuality are not fear, guilt, shame, denial, and scapegoating, but pride, honesty, justice, compassion, humor, and celebration.

### **How to Get the Most Benefit from This Book**

My goal in writing this book is not only to provide useful information but also, I hope, to help people transform negative attitudes toward sexuality into positive attitudes. You can use this book as a tool for exploring your own psyche by paying attention to your emotional responses as you read. Sex is an emotional topic, and some passages in this book may trigger powerful emotions—embarrassment, anger, disgust, anguish, grief, or others. When a strong emotion arises, it might be useful to stop reading and to pay attention to any memories or physical sensations associated with the emotion. Breathe into the emotion, allow yourself to feel it completely with no resistance, and see where it takes you. It may lead to a new understanding of some aspect of your life or personality.

If, at some point in reading this book, you find yourself confused and unable to think, you may be experiencing a shame attack. Shame inhibits the activity of the part of the brain responsible for rational thinking, so if suddenly you find that you can't think, there is a good chance that shame is involved. This realization is useful in itself, because many people cannot identify shame even when they are experiencing it. Being able to recognize shame in yourself and others will ultimately increase your understanding of the major role that shame plays in our lives. But while you're in the midst of shame, just breathe into it, allow yourself to feel it without resistance, and find in your heart some compassion and love for yourself. Experiencing love while we feel unlovable is the key to healing shame. If you experience overwhelming emotions while reading this book, it might be helpful to discuss them with a trusted friend or counselor.

### **The Religious Angle**

This book is written from a religious perspective, but I hope it will be useful to both religious and nonreligious audiences. To me, the word *religion* does not refer primarily to religious traditions, beliefs, rituals, and organizations, but rather to a class of experiences. Etymologically, *religion* means *reunion* or *reconnection*. So for me, anything that promotes a deep connection with God, other people, the universe, and our own true selves is religious; anything that does not promote these experiences is not religious. (From this perspective, atheists or agnostics who feel deeply connected with other people and with nature could be called religious, although I can understand why they might prefer not to use that term themselves.)

Eros is intrinsically religious because it promotes deep connection. Many ancient cultures regarded eros not just as sex, but as relatedness. They saw eros as the attractive and creative force that holds the universe together; as such, it is also the force that brings humans together in intimate relationships. In this context, sex exists within eros, that is, within a wider and more-

than-human web of relationships. To talk about sex without this religious context is to diminish its meaning.

In my analysis, religious beliefs and organizations betray their mission by playing a major role in perpetuating the cycle of sexual abuse. To break the cycle of sexual abuse, religious leaders and believers must undergo a *metanoia*, a change of mind and heart, or, in modern jargon, a paradigm shift. I will try to facilitate that paradigm shift by examining the inadequacy of the old religious paradigm of sexuality and by helping readers imagine what a new religious vision of sexuality would look and feel like. Since Christianity is the dominant religion in America, most of my religious references will be Christian. (My current religious practice might best be described as post-Christian, so Christian readers should be prepared for a different perspective on some issues.) Readers from other traditions can judge for themselves how much of what I say applies to their religion.

I will occasionally use the word *God*. If that word is not meaningful to you, feel free to substitute the word *reality*. That substitution should not change the meaning of the sentence. The idea of a “loving reality” may not fit into the modern materialistic worldview, but it’s an experience that many people from many cultures throughout history have shared, and it’s a possibility worth being open to.