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The Moral and Psychological Effects of the Sexual Revolution

Thomas L. Doyle, M.D.

It is clear that the world and society today are in a state of revolution. While rapid widesweeping change is evident to all, the implications of the phenomena are more readily observed by physicians and particularly psychiatrists. People are made insecure and anxious; they are baffled, for the values by which they once lived and measured their lives no longer apply. Yet along with the anxiety a certain sense of new hope and freedom, openness and honesty can be perceived as well.

The causes of this upheaval and revolution in all phases of our culture and in particular in the sexual area are complex and indeed multiple. Among these are the rapid advances in the past decade in the sciences and technology, the effect of the mass media particularly television bringing every event and discovery into the living room, and especially the effects of the new openness and flexibility brought into religion led off by Vatican II.

The world stands in a new place. People everywhere know that they



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have not been here before — they relate to other persons differently, they do not perceive and feel as they once did and their behavior and actions have changed. Like history itself, all of these complex phenomena have just happened. It is frightening to all and is perceived as a crisis because it has been so rapid and because no one can predict its outcome nor where it will come to balance nor what it may mean to the individual, the family, our institutions, life itself.

The purpose here is to evaluate the effects of the change in sexual values and practice in our society. Athanasius, Shaver, and Tarvis¹ have demonstrated in a survey of 20,000 persons the marked and significant increase in the acting out of the sexual impulses and drives. This is shown to be true in premarital life as well as extramarital experience. Persons everywhere were shown to be more free, less inhibited, to be interested in experimentation and to react less with guilt. Dana Farnsworth at Harvard² has observed and reported that college students have adopted a sexual code far different from that which guided their counterparts of ten or fifteen years ago. There is no difference of opinion among college physicians and psychiatrists that a new attitude does exist.

Experience in my own psychiatric practice demonstrates a marked increase in overt sexual activity, both homosexual and heterosexual over the last ten years in the same general population of patients. These studies indicate that there is approximately three times the amount of overt sex activity among patients in the years 1966 to 1971 as there was in the period 1961 to 1966. The same observations are made by my colleagues in the specialty. People simply are not

repressing and sublimating their sexual drives, they feel that those drives are there to be used and they do not feel that it is wrong. If anything they feel that such experience is a cause of growth within them and such open relationships are required for them to be mature as they see it.

These attitudes have come to people because of the sexual revolution and the new morality which has come to exist. It is reflected in new standards supported in our schools and colleges including those with Church sponsorship and affiliation. No longer do educators and religious authorities agree that they can or should control the sexual practices of their students. They refuse to legislate concerning these matters of sexual behavior, stating that students should be treated as responsible adults and that they will not act in *loco parentis*.

On many Catholic College campuses there is no longer restriction to having members of the opposite sex visit in the dormitory rooms on campus with full freedom. Hence, the practice called the granting of "parentals" is significantly increased.

The young in particular must now make new psychic adjustments. They no longer follow rules generally espoused in the past by religion, culture, medical specialists that sex activity may be evil and that it should not be entered except in marriage. They must answer the question in courtship and relating closely to others: should we indulge? Previous values and strong religious guidelines are having less effect.

Still there are many who feel guilt and who do make judgments with

good insight as to the meaning and significance of their sexual behavior. Without realizing it they have introduced more traditional values and are living happily with them. They may sublimate sexual impulses and be willing to postpone gratification to a later time.

In addition, the age old deterrents have been effected by science and its amazing advances. At one time the fear of venereal disease was a great prohibition. Today, although people fear infection, they also know that if they do contract these diseases that prompt and effective means of therapy are readily at hand. Certainly the fear of impregnation was a major factor in impeding free and frequent intimacy. No longer is this true, for persons have the most effective methods of contraception available and their use is being accepted. Guilt is not felt among the vast majority and even religious counselors warn the young that if you are to indulge, know what you are doing about the possibility of conception. Lastly, abortion itself has become available without fear of legal prosecution and so the last deterrent to sex activity has been removed for many.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that in the new sexual value system *the sex act per se is no moral problem*. Persons feel that, in itself, it is a neutral act. They listen to the new moral code, not to the older traditional religious one.

Whereas in the past a puritanism existed in our culture and society — any sex act, thoughts and deeds were considered serious grievous sins, this puritanism is now tending to pass. This former puritanism caused repression, and guilt, scruples and conflict. People no longer feel guilty as they

once did and hence they no longer confess these acts. In the churches, confession has fallen off and priests and ministers are not consulted on these matters as before. However, this puritanism has been replaced by a new strict guilt producing mechanism ^{which} that is that the young feel that, in becoming close to one of the opposite sex, they must have full intimacy or they are robbing the other of fulfillment. With it there is the dynamic force that each must reach orgasm and preferably at the same time or else they may have somehow failed each other. The puritanism of this new demand can be just as great and equally conflictual and guilt producing. The young seek what they term a meaningful relationship, a closeness and type of commitment to give fully in affection and physical intimacy. If such relationships are entered to freely and without deeper meaning and loyalty, then the intimacy is perceived as empty, dehumanizing and a type of rejection. Such repeated relationship without meaning, causes these persons to feel empty and apathy is increased within them. This apathy, this concept of can we love no one, can we not feel, what truly matters anyway, is a major cause for a turn to drugs so that some feelings can be experienced.

The sexual revolution has had its impact on those about to marry or the newly married as well. Without doubt even those young persons raised in a religious background and from stable family structures no longer feel that they should not have careful and free family planning and use the various forms of contraception to accomplish this. They do not wish to avoid child bearing and rearing; they do wish to have their children when they feel ready in every way, psychologically, financially etc. In addition, they wish a free uninhibited sexual life in mar-

riage; a spontaneity, closeness and frequency that can only be accomplished through the use of contraceptives.

Among married couples of an older age group, often those persons who are of straight and stricter standards and highly motivated by religious values, there is a search for more complete and fulfilling sex experience between husband and wife. With the uncertainties of impregnation as the menopause is approached, the use of contraceptive techniques is more frequently undertaken, and such persons do feel less guilt than had been perceived in the past.

The sexual revolution has established new attitudes concerning extra-marital experience. Certainly society and religion still exert a strong force of prohibition. Still here, too, the concept that the sex act itself is neutral is having effect. The attitude has grown that if extra-marital sex hurts no one, it is acceptable. This is particularly true if the married partners agree that they will permit this to each other. Still the potential for regression, guilt and destruction to the union is great and, in a very high number of cases, such practice eventually leads to dissolution of the marriage.

Within the new morality there are those who assume an amoral view; that no restrictions at all are necessary. They feel that if all sexual restrictions were lifted, and more importantly, if an individual's emotional distress were solved, life and the world would be a happy place. However, such persons are not aware of the lessons of history, for whenever unrestrained sexual freedom has been tried, it has resulted in

social disintegration and experiments in this direction have been abandoned because they have literally created social chaos.

It is evident that the new sexual morality has produced profound changes in psychological adjustment. In dealing with the young who are so involved in this new value system there is a demand from them for *integrity* and *honesty* on the part of religious leaders, counselors and professional people. They will not permit any deluding of the issue nor "phoniness". Hence, they demand truth and sound reasons for any values given and not some rule, law or standard that was handed down from years back and to them, never adequately proven.

The Church and religion no longer have a clear stand on the direction which the new sexual morality is taking. These dynamic changes in ethics are happening without any particular direction. The young have "turned off" the old mores and are just not listening to the old hierarchical directions. Existential and pragmatic concepts are ruling moral decisions in people including those persons who are moral leaders and who are religious, both in what they teach and in the way they conduct their own lives.

In short, the Church and moral leaders are simply not coming to grips with these moral issues. Not only is there a huge gap between what is taught and what people are feeling and doing, but there is no communication at all in the great majority of cases. If there is no honest communication, this develops an atmosphere which invites persons to disregard, interpret, and

throw off and over all value systems only to their own damage.

If the Church and moral leaders continue to ignore the problem, the misuse of sex can grow and hasten progress toward social decay. Religious leaders are communicating well in areas of ecumenism and the development of new liturgies. Why is it not possible to share well and develop sound trends in the area of sexual behavior and values?

In openness and honesty there must be a will to listen. This is indeed good, for only in this way will progress come. However, it is clear that people search out and need insight and direction. They turn to religion, to those who are capable of leadership in these value areas including those in the practice of medicine. All values and mores can never be thrown over, for here is regression, hurt to each other and decay in society.

Simple and sound measurements for understanding the meaning of a sex act must be shared. The person must be able to ask himself, what of this act, is it good or evil. If any given sex act causes regression in that individual's psyche, if it causes hurt and guilt to him or another person, then it is an absence of good and that is defined as an evil. Religious and moral leaders simply must be involved and not permit this gap to exist. They cannot escape this obligation any longer by sitting at a distance and restating the rigid old systems. "The action is" where the people are now living and behaving.

Moral leaders must demonstrate the value in any relationship and commitment of sacrifice, sublimation of instinctive drive, and postponement of gratification. They must stress the capacity for the use of judgment for this is the key to the growth of ego strength. In this, many traditional mores including the commandments are clearly so sound psychologically and lead to health and growth.

The proper use of sex calls for commitment, the improper use of sex still compromises those engaged in it, just as it always has. What constitutes commitment and what compromises the individual are crucial issues for discussion as well as for decision.

It is fitting to conclude with a quotation made by Rabbi Nathan Pearlman in New York on April 9, 1971: "Freedom is not freedom to do what you want, but freedom to do what you should or ought. Never has there been so much license, so little happiness and so little freedom."

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