

## Chapter One: The Western Sexual Morality

Is sex inherently evil? A Muslim would be surprised by this question. Such a thought would never cross his mind. But the relevance of this question to Christianity and the Western world will become clear from the following pages.

In the last eighty years, especially after the two World Wars, the sexual morality of the West has undergone a great change which is commonly described as the "sexual revolution." On the ruins of the dying Christian morality, the west is trying to build a liberal sexual morality known as the "New Sexual Morality". To understand the social and historical background in which the new morality is emerging, we must study the sexual morality of the Christian Church.

### A. Christian Sexual Morality

Although Christianity is commonly thought to be a religion based on Jesus Christ's teachings, I use the word "Christianity" in this book for the teachings of the Church establishment. I am justified in doing so because the Bible has recorded nothing from Jesus Christ on marriage and sex. The exception being the sermon condemning visual and physical adultery:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery. But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. 1

The first person in Christianity to talk on sexual morality was St. Paul. He says, "It is good for a man not to touch a woman." (*Corinthians I, 7:1*) In simple words this means that the Christian Church teaches that celibacy is better than marriage, and that the human body is not for sexual pleasure but for the Lord only. "The body is not meant for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body...Do you know that your bodies are members of Christ? (*Corinthians I, 6:13,15*)

St. Paul knew that celibacy means suppressing human nature but human nature cannot be suppressed.

He knew that if marriage is totally forbidden, then people will still indulge in sexual gratification unlawfully. So he says, "Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife and every woman have her own husband."(*Corinthians I, 7:2*)

Then as if to prevent the people from forgetting the holiness of celibacy, he continues: "I say this by way of concession, not of command. For I wish that all men were as I myself am...Therefore, I say to the unmarried and the widows that it is good for them to remain singles as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn." (*Corinthians I, 7:6-9*) So marriage, when compared to fornication, is the lesser of two evils!

St. Paul further goes on to describe that marriage means distress: "Now concerning the unmarried...I think that in the view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is...Are you free from a wife? Then do not seek a wife. But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a girl marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry shall have trouble in flesh." (*Corinthians I, 7:25-28*)

According to the Bible, marriage and pleasing God are antipathetic to each other. St. Paul says, "I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord, but the married man is anxious about worldly affairs, how to please his wife and his interest is divided...The unmarried woman cares for the affairs of the Lord, that she may be holy in body and spirit; but a married woman cares for worldly affairs, how to please her husband.

I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord." (*Corinthians I, 7:32,35*) He concludes the Christian position as follows: "So that he who marries his betrothed does *well*, and he who refrains from marrying will do *better*." (*Corinthians I, 7:38*)

So the Christian view on marriage, in its original form, can be summarized as follows:

- (a) Celibacy is good and should be adopted;
- (b) in order to refrain from fornication, marriage is allowed; but it is regrettable and one should try his or her best to avoid it;
- (c) marriage retards salvation and is antipathetic to pleasing God.

Three centuries after St. Paul, came a theologian known as St. Augustine. Like his predecessor, he believed that sex was a threat to spiritual upliftment: "I know nothing which brings the manly mind down from the heights more than a woman's caresses and that joining of bodies without which one cannot have a wife."<sup>2</sup>

He went even further than St. Paul by associating guilt with sex. He acknowledged that was essential for reproduction but argued that the act of sexual intercourse itself was tainted with guilt because of the sin of Adam and Eve. Sexual intercourse was transformed from something innocent to something shameful

by the original sin of Adam and Eve, which is passed on from generation to generation.

In his *The City of God*, St. Augustine says, "Man's transgression [i.e., Adam and Eve's sin] did not annul the blessing of fertility bestowed upon him before he sinned, but infected it with the disease of lust."<sup>3</sup>

In short, he preached that: (a) sex was something shameful because of the original sin of Adam and Eve; (b) chastity and celibacy was of a higher morality than marriage; (c) celibacy was a prerequisite for priests and nuns.

## **B. The Victorian Era**

There is no doubt that the survey of the Christian sexual morality is essential for understanding the sexual revolution of this century; but to fully comprehend the historical background in which the new sexual morality has emerged, it is equally important to look at the Victorian era.

"While the Christians in the pre-Victorian era were content with restricting sex to marriage, Victorians were concerned with how best to harness sex and rechannel it to loftier ends. For Victorians a moral man abstained from sex outside of marriage and was highly selective and considerate in sexual expression within marriage. And a moral woman endured these sporadic ordeals and did nothing to encourage them. Pleasure was not an appropriate goal for either sex, but especially not so for a woman."<sup>4</sup>

The following can be stated as the sexual morality of the Christian West in the nineteenth century:

- (a) sex is morally degrading compared to celibacy;
- (b) sexual passion in human beings is a result of the original sin, therefore sex for pleasure is sinful;
- (c) sex without pleasure is allowed only with the intention of procreation.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the prevalent view was that sex is inherently evil and is acceptable only as a lesser of two evils of fornication and marriage.

## **C. The Sexual Revolution**

What you read above was a brief historical and social background of the Christian West against which the New Morality was emerging. The Church made a serious error in suppressing the most natural urge of human beings, the very means of their perpetuity. And it is obvious that natural urges can never be suppressed. 'Allamah Rizvi writes:

If a religion shuts its eyes to the intricacies of family problems, its followers, sooner or later, will revolt against it, destroying all religious tenets in the wake of the rebellion...Christianity ignored the claims of human nature, extolling the idea of celibacy. Many zealous people tried to live up to that ideal. Monks

and nuns shut themselves in monasteries. For a short period, this scheme worked well.

Then nature took its revenge; the monks and abbots cultivated the idea that they were representatives of Christ, and the nuns were given the titles of 'brides of Christ.' So with easy conscience they turned the monasteries into centres of sexual liberties.<sup>5</sup>

Commenting on the attitude of the Christian clergy, Russell writes, "It was only towards the end of the thirteenth century that the celibacy of the clergy was rigidly enforced. The clergy, of course, continued to have illicit relations with women..."<sup>6</sup>

Pope John XII was condemned for adultery and incest; the abbot-elect of St. Augustine, at Canterbury, in 1171 was found to have seventeen illegitimate children in a single village; Henry III, Bishop of Leige, was deposed in 1274 for having sixty-five illegitimate children.

The writers of the Middle Ages are full of accounts of nunneries that were like brothels, of the vast multitude of infanticides within their walls, and of incest among the clergy which forced the church to announce that priests should not be permitted to live with their mothers and sisters.<sup>7</sup>

This and nothing else could have been the consequence of an unnatural sexual morality. Those who could not suppress their natural urges, indulged in sinful acts secretly; others, like Martin Luther, revolted against the church and started the reformation movement which abandoned celibacy.

And when the Christian Church lost its influence in social affairs of the Western world and a separation between the Church and the state took place, even the lay man revolted. This revolt gained momentum after the two World Wars; and the Christian West started the sexual revolution in reaction to the sexual suppression.

A reform movement takes the society from extremes towards moderation; whereas a revolution, in its early stages, takes the society from one extreme to the other. ' Allamah Rizvi comments, "Nature can be compared to a steel spring which, when pressed down, jumps back with equal force. When it took its revenge upon Christians, it turned Christian societies into the most permissive, libertine and undisciplined ones the world had ever seen."<sup>8</sup>

Thus the New Morality emerged in the West and leaped to the other extreme. From the extreme of suppressing natural desires, some preachers of the new morality went to the extreme of unrestrained sexual freedom which is the realm of the animal world. They propounded the idea of "sex for fun," "sex for its own sake" and "free sex" which eventually would have completely destroyed the concept of family, the fabric of human society.

In the late eighties, it can be said that the spring of nature is returning to its normal position. Katchadourian and Lunde, writing in 1980, say, "The morality of 'sex for fun' or 'sex for its own sake' never appealed to even the majority of the young. The romantic ideals of marriage, fidelity, and a stable

home life for rearing children were still very much alive and influential in American life. A new synthesis of values is arising.

Many of the changes in sexual attitudes of the 1960s have been retained, but the more radical beliefs have been found to be unacceptable by most people. Many individuals are willing to approve of premarital exploration, but they want to be certain that no one gets hurt. Many have found that 'sex for its own sake' was not as gratifying as it looked when it first became popular; and others have seen so many people hurt by irresponsible sex that they are asking for a new morality of responsible sex."<sup>9</sup>

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To summarize, we can say that firstly, the West traveled from one extreme (that of sexual suppression exemplified by the Christian Church) to the other extreme (that of free sex and sex for fun exemplified by the liberal sexual morality). Secondly, the West has realized that free sex and sex for fun is not acceptable to human sensibilities. Finally, after jumping from one extreme to the other, the West is longing for "a new morality of responsible sex." In our view, the morality of responsible sex is the balanced sexual morality of Islam to which we shall turn soon.

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The reason why I discussed the religious and social background in which the sexual revolution has taken place is to let the Muslims In the West and the East know that this revolution was not a by-product of science and technology per se (although some scientific technologies like contraceptives have made it easier); rather it was a reaction to the suppressive sexual morality of the Christian Church. This, I hope, will also break the myth among many Asians and Africans, especially the elite class, that every behavior and norm of the West is based on sound scientific reasons!

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1. Matthew, 5:27-29.
  2. Basic Writings of St. Augustine, p. 455.
  3. The City of God, p. 21
  4. Fundamentals of Human Sexuality, p. 483.
  5. The Family Life of Islam, p. 8.
  6. Marriage and Morals, p. 64.
  7. History of European Morals, vol. II p. 350-351.
  8. The Family Life of Islam, p. 8-9.
  9. Fundamentals of Human Sexuality, p. 420.

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