

Sexual Morality: Christian Demands and Modern Attitudes

[Some portions of these notes have been lifted from my existing publications, and they are therefore copyright and should not be used verbatim. They are provided here in order to give a summary of points for those studying this topic, and as a reminder of what was covered in the SEC lecture in December 05.]

First of all, I want to make it clear that neither ‘Christian demands’ or ‘modern attitudes’ are clear. There are different views on sexuality within the worldwide Christian community, and the arguments upon which they are based vary. In part that is because, like any religion, Christianity finds itself growing within different cultures in different parts of the world, and some of those cultures are stricter in terms sexual codes of conduct than others.

Nor is there any single ‘modern’ attitude – an attitude is modern if it is used in today’s society, and in the light of today’s society, and not simply a yearning for the attitudes of an earlier age. Although beyond what we can do now – notice also that the early Christian community had a very different set of social priorities from those of today. First of all, as far as we can understand, they expected the end of the world to come at any time. Therefore, the best thing to do was to remain single, rather than to become cluttered with worldly concerns for home and family. The ideal, therefore is to remain single – but for those who burn from lust, it is better to contain that through marriage. So, in the earliest church, marriage was a pragmatic solution to the problem of sexuality, in a community that did not see any future. (Also, keep in mind that the Christian community grew out of the Jewish one. This contrasted with the very much more liberal views of sex held within the general society of those times.

And this mis-match between religious expectation and the mores of the surrounding peoples was there also in the Old Testament. One of the problems that Israel found was that the canaanite religions were based on the idea of fertility. To celebrate and also encourage the land to be fertile, one went to the temple, which was well stocked with prostitutes, and worshipped by acting out the most appropriate expression of one’s desire for fecundity! No wonder the religion posed its temptations for the Children of Israel!

Of course, it is worth remembering that other religions have very different attitudes towards sex. Hindu temples are decorated with images of copulating couples. The Kama Sutra, most informative of all religious texts, gives advise for enhancing sexual pleasure. In Buddhism, there is, on the one hand, a liberal attitude to sexuality (very much leaving it up to the individual or the culture within which it is practiced), and on the other an emphasis on the monastic and celibate ideal.

Even within a body such as the Anglican Church, there is debate about whether or not gays should be ordained, and particularly whether they should become bishops. There is tension on this and a whole raft of other issues, between the European and North American churches, for example, and those from Africa.

So be careful, in answering an examination question on sexuality, not to create a single caricature of a Christian position (attitude, I mean, not sexual position) – show that you are aware of differing views.

There is also the matter of whether morality belongs to the realm of intentions and thoughts, or just to that of actions. Thus, for example, the official Anglican position on homosexuality

accepts that some people have homosexual inclinations and desires, but insists that people should not put them into action. Those who are homosexual and celibate, are therefore accepted if they want to be ordained.

Having said all that, it also needs to be remembered that Christianity has influenced social and cultural life in Europe for so long, that what is generally presented as Christian demands, and not too different from the demands of the more conservative views within secular society. Much of what passes for Christianity, equally, is simply a baptism of conservative social values. To caricature it, it is sometimes held that, in the USA, family life, carrying a gun and earning good money honestly, are all features of the 'Christian life' and people would have no qualms about praying for success in material terms.

Having said all that, there are **two very broad philosophical approaches** to sexuality, which can be taken to illustrate the broadly religious and secular attitudes today:

- Natural Law on one side – supported by Catholic and other Christians
- Utilitarianism – from the standpoint of secular ethics

The Natural law approach to sex:

Originates in the thinking of Aristotle – everything has its natural function, which shows its 'essence'

For Aquinas (combining Aristotle with Christian beliefs) God creates everything in order to play its part in the world – since it is designed for a particular purpose, that purpose defines what is right or wrong.

Example: heterosexual intercourse --

- Its natural purpose is to fertilise an egg, which in turn will be nurtured within a womb to produce another human being. This process helps to maintain the human species.
- Given the physical contortions involved, it is difficult to imagine how copulation could occur by random chance in the course of normal social life! Sexual attraction and arousal is therefore the means that nature has supplied for achieving this particular end.
- Sexual arousal and the act of penetration are therefore the 'efficient cause', whilst the production of a new human being is the 'final cause' of the sexual act.

If it is the 'final cause' that determines right and wrong, then strictly speaking, in terms of sex:

- Intercourse between members of the same sex is wrong (because it cannot result in conception);
- Intercourse with those who are outside the age range for childbearing is wrong (for the same reason);
- Anal and oral intercourse and masturbation are wrong (for the same reason);
- Any attempt to frustrate the process of conception is wrong, because it tries to separate off the sexual act from its natural purpose.

In traditional Catholic teaching it is therefore wrong to practise contraception. Each sexual act should include the possibility of conception. Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* (1968) expressed it in this way:

'The Church... in urging men to the observance of the precepts of the natural law, which it interprets by its constant doctrine, teaches as absolutely required that any use whatsoever of marriage must retain its natural potential to procreate human life.'

Sex within the 'safe period' of the woman ovulatory cycle is generally permitted in Catholic moral teaching because the failure to conceive at that time is part of nature's limitation, rather than the result of a direct attempt to do something unnatural. The same applies to those who are past childbearing age, on the grounds that, by a miracle, conception might take place.

Utilitarian approaches to sex:

For those following the 'natural law' argument, the natural function of sex was the conception of children, and that this was its justification. Sex that deliberately sought to frustrate this (e.g. through contraception), or which did not have it as a possible outcome (e.g. homosexuality or masturbation) was therefore wrong.

In practice, however, for what appears to be a majority of people, sexual morality is assessed on a utilitarian basis. It might be right to have sexual intercourse provided:

- 1) that it takes place in private (nobody else is involved or likely to be offended by it)
- 2) that the partners consent to it (it is considered by them to increase their own happiness)
- 3) that it does not harm others.

'It's not hurting anyone, and it's what we want, so why shouldn't we?'

This statement about sexual morality is utilitarian. Now try to imagine how a parent might respond if this is the attitude of his or her son or daughter. There are two lines of approach:

1. 'It's wrong, unless you're married.'
- or
2. 'It will lead to unhappiness because....'
- or
3. 'If you're going to have sex anyway, at least make sure you use contraception.'
- In the first case, there is an absolute rule. This could be backed up by natural law, but if challenged, many would give a string of reasons why sex outside marriage is not a good idea, and most of these would be based on results.
 - The basis of the second response is clearly utilitarian - and may become the 'fall back' position of someone who starts with the first response and is then challenged.
 - The third response is also utilitarian - taking a positive approach to minimise possible harmful effects, and thus tip the balance of happiness in favour of having sex rather than not.

Although the positions taken by the young person and the parent may sound very different - the one libertarian and the other authoritarian - they may actually be using **the same utilitarian methods of assessing the situation.**

Notice that, for example in advertising about contraception and the risks of HIV infection, the moral arguments in favour of taking a 'responsible' attitude to sex, are utilitarian. Indeed, the major shift in sexual attitudes brought about by the threat of HIV and AIDS, is largely due to the threat of harmful results, and these, when taken seriously, become the basis of 'responsible' behaviour on a utilitarian view.

Note the difference between ACT utilitarianism and RULE utilitarianism. The latter says that, if a rule is there for the benefit of society as a whole, it should be taken into account in making a utilitarian assessment. So a utilitarian will not simply set rules aside for the immediate benefit of individuals.

An example of this might be the assessment of the value of marriage and stable family life.

The same sort of utilitarian argument surrounds issues of adultery and the break up of marriages. Very often debate focuses not on the actual sexual desire of one person for someone who is not their marriage partner, nor on the morality of their sexual relationship as

such, but on the potential harm that this might do others - especially children of the marriage.

Sexual attraction outside marriage may be presented as the cause of so many single-parent families, which in turn may be the reason why so many people are dependent on state help. The sexual act is therefore not condemned from a traditional 'rule based' standpoint, but from one which highlights the social and economic consequences.

I am not arguing here that the utilitarian view is necessarily the right one with regard to sexual morality, but that it is implied by much current debate on sexual issues.

Problem with utilitarianism – you can never know ALL the results of what you do. It may have long-term repercussions, if not to you, then to others, that you cannot guess at the present moment.

BUT that applies to everything, not just sex. We have to do what we believe to be right at the time, and in the light of what we expect to happen. But there are no guarantees that it will work out – most people who get beyond middle age would be able to give you many examples of decisions taken in the past, which – had they known the full tally of consequences – they would not have taken.

Not every secular or modern attitude is dominated by utilitarianism – but it has been hugely influential, and many people assume it, rather than thinking it through.

So, to recap:

- No single thing as 'Christian demands' – because there is variety.
- No such thing as a single 'modern' attitude – except, perhaps, the idea of personal responsibility and freedom to make up your own mind

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