

## **Sex Now and Then:**

### **A Discussion of Sex in America, on College Campuses, and in the Roman Empire**

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Michael Moffatt describes “The New Sexual Orthodoxy” in *Coming of Age in New Jersey* (Rutgers U. Press, 1989), page 195:

If pre-Victorians associated sex with sin and guilt but nevertheless often enjoyed it quietly as a private pleasure ... and if the Victorians discovered sexuality and then repressed it, contemporary Anglo-Americans almost *must* celebrate it. Sexuality almost *must* be central to one’s sense of self. And the essence of sexuality itself, in currently established conventions, is a technique-centered act of intercourse to orgasm – Health calls it “the big O.” If the archetypical Victorian novel ended in the good marriage ... the archetypical contemporary romance ends in the explicitly described perfect orgasm (Heath 1982).

In undergraduates’ anonymous self-reports of their sexual activities in the 1970’s and 1980’s,

it was virtually impossible, for instance, for any writer of these papers, woman or man, to say, Sex is incidental, or I’m too young to think about such things, or To tell you the truth, I don’t like sex very much. Sex *had* to be important, even for the sexually inactive. ... And those few students who tried to move away from the orthodoxy, who tried to say something idiosyncratic, were in the end “controlled by the discourse.” In the end ... they virtually had to cop out for the centrality of sex and for sexual pleasure as an ideal. ... The new sexual orthodoxy, as it was written in many of these papers, posited the normality and importance of sex for any postpubertal individual, female or male, unmarried or married. Among these students, the value of premarital chastity was thus almost as dead as the dodo. ... Only 3 of 144 student writers suggested that they were intentional virgins. All 3 were women; all 3 were Catholics; and all 3 were clearly defensive about their archaic sexual stances. ... And even the intentional virgins believed in their right to sexual pleasure as unmarried persons, another tenet of the new orthodoxy (195-196).

The final tenet of the new American sexual orthodoxy, undergraduate version, was the importance of sex with affection. Almost all the student writers of these papers said or implied that there was a difference between sex with someone you love and casual sex. ... [A]lmost all these adolescent Americans – females and males, sexual gourmets and gourmands, conventional heterosexuals and sexual radicals – agreed that the preferable or superior sexual practice was sex with affection (with “love,” with “caring,” with “commitment,” with “strong feelings,” and so on). To adapt a concept from Louis Dumont, sex with affection was the “encompassing value” in nearly all these undergraduate sexual self-reports (195-202).

Moffatt typifies undergraduate camps within the new sexual orthodoxy into several groups.

- **Neotraditionalists** dominate (“women and men should follow different sexual moralities”) and fall into the subcategories of
  - o *Neanderthals* (sexual predators who “only described casual sexual adventures, either pickup sex or ‘orgies’ of various kinds” and depersonalized women),
  - o *Don Juans* (who kept ‘score’ on the number of their sexual conquests),

- *moderates* (who regard casual sex as rather empty and prefer ‘good women’ to ‘sluts’), and
- *neotraditionalist women* who accept all these characterizations and the feminine submissiveness they imply, but adapt them in various ways to the new sexual orthodoxy (sex “gives me a way or an outlet to show my boyfriend how much I care about him and love him,” said a Junior female) (204-212).
- **Romantic men** appropriate neotraditionalist women’s attitudes, devaluing casual sex, not dividing women into good women and sluts, and exhibiting degrees of mutuality in their approach (213-214).
- **Experimentalist women** adopt neotraditionalist male practices as their own (215) and act “as if they had consciously chosen to try enjoying sex without guilt, and without the traditional women’s commitment to and from males” (216-217), though without applying the traditional double-standard back on men: “Neanderthals proved their manhood through sleazy sex with sleazy females; experimentalist women looked for sexual fun wherever they could find it (220).
- **Liberals** are “the apparently unconflicted offspring of the new sexual orthodoxy. They attempted the higher synthesis: casual sex without guilt *and* the deeper pleasures of romance; the meaning of sex with commitment *and* the thrill of the quick sexual encounter” (221).
- **Radicals** are the only (tiny) group that departs from new sexual orthodoxy itself, especially feminists (roundly condemned, criticized, or at least distanced by almost all respondents) who do “not accept the basic presupposition of the new orthodoxy – that ‘sex life’ could be carved off as an independent, ahistorical, technique-centered, psychology-driven human need” and who criticize both sexual objectification and romance (223-225).

The few nonheterosexuals in Moffatt’s sample could often be categorized within these same types (226-229).

This sexual orthodoxy is communicated to students from childhood through adolescence in home, through peers, and through mass pop culture. *It is not just a feature of youth culture, but structures not just college sexual practices but adolescence beforehand and marriage and family life afterward.*

For a glimpse of how this orthodoxy has changed (but not weakened) since 1987, consider the description of American life in the year 2000 in Tom Wolfe’s *Hooking Up* (Picador 2000), in which even non-pornographic magazines offered explicit fashion ads, addiction to Internet pornography was endemic among males from teenage years through their fifties, successful men paid no social price for dumping their “first wives” for decades younger “trophy wives,” teens abandoned dating for “hooking up,” cohabitation was standard courtship procedure, and Bob Dole hawked Viagra to seniors (4-9). Wolfe put his research of collegiate sexual habits to use in crafting his realistic novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004).

### Questions to consider:

*What “story” is America telling with its sexual practices? Who are we in this picture?*

*How is it and is it not compatible with the story of Jesus Christ?*

*What stories are American Christians telling with our sexual practices?*

*Are evangelicals Moffatt’s neotraditionalists? romantics? experimentalists? liberals? radicals?*

*How faithful are we to the good news we claim to profess?*

*What might a Christ-shaped sexual ethic look like in America?*

My theses:

a) While in the years between Moffatt's research and Wolfe's observations the momentum has moved away from neotraditionalism and toward liberalism, the new sexual orthodoxy is as firm as ever.

b) Moreover, Christians basically refuse to challenge it. (For example, many conservative Christians criticize feminists for the same reasons other secular non-feminists do.) Rather, evangelical sex practices have adapted to the widespread cultural conviction that sexual pleasure is a right, and Christian marriage is the right place for it. Christian marriage is where sex can be its most fulfilling, liberating, etc.

c) Since Christians have not questioned the assumptions of the new sexual orthodoxy itself, we force ourselves to try to graft Christianity onto an essentially individualistic, self-centered, pleasure-oriented ethic as a kind of alternative neotraditionalism or romanticism.

d) This doesn't work, since "sexual pleasure is my right" is not compatible with "love your neighbor as yourself." So, given the sheer weight of the cultural pleasure keeping new sexual orthodoxy intact, this means that relationships fail (in teenage years, in college, and in marriages) when Christian relationships do not deliver at least on the *hope* of fulfilling the demands of orthodoxy.

e) Christians are called to be radicals rather than adapters, questioning the orthodoxy itself through the logic of the cross rather than trying to work within it. (What might our alternative look like?)