

CHAPTER 4

Attitudes to Sex

Strange as it may seem, throughout most of mankind's history, people did not make the connection between sex and reproduction. In fact, such ignorance is still common among more 'primitive' peoples even today. Until fairly recently (a mere ten thousand years or so ago), sex was basically for pleasure. Like all human pleasures, it was used not only for its own sake but also to bond with, reward and control others. The discovery that pregnancy results from sexual intercourse, in humans as well as in other animals, wrought a huge change in human culture.

Religion had its roots in sex. Primitive tribes throughout the world danced around poles and other phallic symbols, threw the odd virgin into the nearest volcano, and fucked themselves silly in an attempt to ensure fertility for themselves, their animals and their plants.

When this didn't work, they invented gods - the sun (male) and earth (the Great Mother) and many others - and encouraged them through various rituals - many involving sex - to bring fertility to the land. The shaman or witchdoctor became the priest and, together with the second oldest profession - the prostitute - tried to harvest sex for material gain.

The Arcadian god, Pan, was half-man and half-goat and as randy as the best of either. With his pipes, he brought music into the service of both sex and religion.

Dionysius, the god of the Thracians, was even more generous. He gave his followers both beer and wine. They found that wine-soaked nights of wild dancing, hunting, eating and mad fucking could produce what we would call ecstasy but they called 'enthusiasm'. Obtaining this state, in which the god enters the worshipper so that they become one, became the new aim of religion.

Orpheus thought it all lacked something: too much dancing and not enough fucking. He brought in Aphrodite, goddess of sexual intercourse, to keep Dionysius happy. Aphrodite was beautiful, charming and a bitch. In due course, Bacchus and Aphrodite produced Priapus, a male in a permanent state of erection. Aphrodite also had two other sons - Eros, god of the emotional state of 'love'; and Hermaphroditos, equipped with the physical characteristics of both sexes. The servants of Aphrodite were prostitutes and they were kept very busy. They had a religious, as well as an amorous, role to play.

Orpheus went on to invent the orgy. Now, it might seem that eating, drinking and fucking oneself into oblivion is just having a good time, but to the Orphics the orgy was a sacrament intended to purify the soul and enable the believer to escape the wheel of life and death. The aim was to free its bondage to the body so it could unite with the divine. The phenomenon of ecstasy suggested that the soul was something more than a feeble double of the self and that it was only when 'out of the body' that it could show its true nature.

There is a striking resemblance between these beliefs and those prevalent in India at about the same time, though it is unlikely that there could have been any contact.

Tantra is a cult of ecstasy based on the mythical experience of joy rather than established dogma. Unlike Orpheism, which was still basically tribal, it is a personal religion. It includes sexuality as a doorway to ecstasy and enlightenment. Sex is whole; it is worship; it is energising and life-giving. Tantric arts, writings and religious rituals

glorify sex. In the Tantric creation myth, the male god Shiva and the female god Shakti united sexuality and spirituality to create the universe (this is known as the Big Bang theory). Man and woman were created as such expressly for the purpose of lovemaking.

In Tantric sex, the male and female polarities merge, creating a sense of the sacred, which is experienced as a connection to the life source itself, the source of creation. This connection lifts the consciousness beyond the physical plane into a field of power and energy much greater than the individual's. Then you feel linked, through your partner, to everything that lives and loves. In your oneness with all existence, you feel that you (and your partner) possess divine qualities and that your true potential is unlimited.

Tantra influenced Buddhism and Taoism. In the latter religion, sex is a sacred duty that must be performed frequently and conscientiously if one is to follow the Supreme Path. But Tantra was always opposed by the Brahmins - the Hindu priesthood - and other wowers who insisted on repressive, monolithic codes and ascetic practices.

The same thing happened in the West. Pythagoras introduced Orphism into Greek philosophy but emphasised its latent asceticism and left out the orgy. Democritus disapproved of sex because, he said, it involved the overwhelming of consciousness by pleasure. Plato, believing that 'sexual intercourse has never done a man good and he is lucky if it has not harmed him' and that the only object of love is to procreate 'because procreation is the nearest thing to perpetuity and immortality that a mortal being can attain', further expurgated Orphism, and his ideas influenced every subsequent Western philosophy that was in any sense religious.

But it was the Romans who put paid to Orphism. Firstly, they amalgamated Venus, their agricultural goddess, with Aphrodite and made her mother of the nation, guardian of marriage and patron of harlots. They changed Dionysius into Bacchus, god of drink and drunkenness. Their god, Liber, patron of growth and fertility, merged with Priapus as a magical giver not only of sexual powers but power in general. And they transformed the orgy into a general free-for-all in which all emotional and sexual restraints were thrown off and all rules of society - legal or moral - were meant only to be broken.

Later, they embraced Christianity. Originally, Christianity was only one of several competing, very similar, Eastern religions. Compared to the practitioners of these other religions, however, the Christian apostles and their followers were organisational geniuses. They established an administration mirroring the imperial one - an administration so effective that Constantine was forced to ally himself with it in an attempt to hold his crumbling empire together. Over the next six centuries, Christianity became the true empire.

Christianity took the old doctrines, rites and symbols and transformed them. It changed the old cross, a representation of penis and testicles and symbol of life and potency, into an asexual symbol of ascetic sacrifice. It replaced the Earth Mother with the Virgin Mother of God. It took the Platonic ideals and made them anti-body and anti-sex.

Saint Paul held that the body was only a prison in which the soul was trapped. It is the body that drags a person down to sin, to the quest for pleasure, to sexual lust. Love came from God but sex came from the Devil. So the twin idiocies of sex as sin and 'platonic love' became part of Western culture.

Perhaps it's something about living in a desert that creates such madness. All the

religions that came out of the desert (Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism) downgraded sex. Manichaeism went further than Paul and condemned sex, even in marriage.

Saint Augustine, on whose ideas the doctrines of the Catholic church were (and still are) largely based, decided that sex in marriage was okay but only if the sole aim was to make babies and if the participants didn't actually enjoy it. What was shameful about lust to Augustine was its independence of the will.

This was what was wrong with sex as far as the Christian fathers and all other ascetics were concerned - it could be so damned enjoyable that you couldn't control it with your will. You can't will your dick to stand erect or will it down if it wants to stand at attention. Augustine thought that this was punishment for Adam biting the apple!

As you no doubt remember, it was Eve who persuaded Adam to commit this terrible deed. A man sinned because a woman tempted him. Augustine, and later John the Scot and Thomas Aquinas, used this to establish woman as embodying man's sensuous and fallen nature.

So the Church fathers inflicted on women the burden of being, at one and the same time: inferior creatures who probably didn't have souls; Virgin Mothers; and temptresses/harlots and general instruments of sin. This did incalculable harm to women, men and the relationships between them. Even now there is the double image of the woman to desire and sleep with and the woman to admire and marry.

By the thirteenth century, this had got even worse. The Cathari regarded all sex as abhorrent and maintained that for a man to love his wife too ardently was a sin worse than adultery.

This attitude was not very different from that of the official Church. It was not a great sin, in its eyes, for a priest to have it off with a prostitute or other handy female (or male) for whom he had no emotional attachment. But for a priest to fall in love and marry was a cardinal offence. This was because integrating his sex life as an expression of his total person meant loss of his will; he would have to consider someone else's needs and desires as equal to his own.

Only one group of Christians - the Anabaptists - revolted against these concepts. If God is good, they argued, a good man will always be guided to do good. Good men (and women) are frequently guided to perform sex; therefore, sex must be good. They were exterminated after a heroic resistance, but not before their ideas had spread - sufficiently so that many Christians today think it's okay to enjoy sex.

When sex created religion it created a Frankenstein's monster that has frequently tried to destroy it. Christianity cannot erase our need for sex. What it can do, however, and what it has been extremely effective in accomplishing, is to inculcate guilt in connection with sex. This becomes a means of perpetuating chronic guilt and this serves to reinforce one's dependence on God.

Unfortunately, no group similar to the Anabaptists ever arose among the followers of the ragged composite of Arab, Jewish and Christian beliefs that came to be known as Islam. It was not that the followers of the Prophet disliked sex for themselves, but sex was intimately bound up with power and prestige. Pleasure in sex belonged to the one who could force his wishes on the means of his obtaining gratification. Like Paul, the religious thinkers of Islam thought women brought it all on themselves; Ghazali, one of the foremost, claimed that 'all the trials, misfortunes and woes which befall men come

from women'. The extreme example of transforming a woman from a partner in sex to an instrument for the male's satisfaction is so-called 'female circumcision' (actually, a painful, disfiguring and diminishing procedure involving the hacking away of the clitoris and much of the vulva), still widely practised in Africa today.

It is strange then that the Arabs took the love song from the Persians and attached to it romantic ideals which blossomed into the courtly love of the Middle Ages in Europe. While this placing of (some) women on a pedestal might seem infinitely better than their earlier treatment as men's possessions and instruments to be used as men desired, the result was almost as demeaning and limiting, and romantic love became a means of converting pleasure into misery more often than of enhancing it.

Through some perverted logic, the Victorians translated this concept into the belief that virtuous women did not, and should not, enjoy sex. A direct result of this was that, at the start of the Edwardian era, there were 80,000 prostitutes on the streets of London and 20,000 in New York, and that 75-80 percent of men had been infected with gonorrhoea and 5-18 percent with syphilis. The fact that the only real sex education most males received was from a prostitute also did little for a healthy married sex life. It is perhaps not surprising that treatments for hysteria in females comprised up to three-quarters of a physician's income.

Despite the efforts of zealots, theologians and misguided moralists who attempt to pervert this heavenly enjoyment, religion will never succeed in completely wiping out sex, and for that we can truly praise whichever God we wish.

But it was science which brought about the radical change in our attitude to sex. Darwin, with his demonstration that the sex drive was the fundamental life force in humans as in animals, laid the foundation. Havelock Ellis, the first modern sexologist, was the first to say that sex could be separated from reproduction; that all individuals are sexual beings with sexual impulses; that 'sexual needs are the needs of the two persons, of the husband and of the wife'; that Christian morality is 'profoundly antagonistic to the art of love'; that the theologian is incompetent to deal with sexual matters; and that the idea of conjugal rights leads to unhappiness in marriage, adultery and divorce.

Freud, despite his many failings as a researcher and interpreter of his own data, had a profound influence, especially in his contention that sex underpins everything and repression of the sex instinct creates guilt and most of our psychological problems. Margaret Sanger, with her ultimately successful campaign to make effective contraception available to all women, perhaps had an even greater influence. But perhaps the most influential of the lot was Marie Stopes, who was determined that married women should enjoy sex and took on the Church and the medical profession in her books, *Married Love* and *Wise Parenthood*, and elsewhere.

Doctors and others began to see the light, and sex manuals like Theodor Van de Velde's *Married Love* and W.F.Robie's *Rational Sex Ethics* and *The Art of Love* appeared. These were still more art than science.

Flawed though they were, Alfred Kinsey's interviews were an extremely influential attempt to put some science into the study of sex. His revelations of the facts of human sexual behaviour provided much of the basis of the Sexual Revolution. He forced the Western world to confront its sexuality and to understand that ignorance and denial are more damaging than knowledge, no matter how disturbing such knowledge may be.

Authors and movie-makers and Hugh Hefner caught the mood and catered to it but official attitudes were slow in changing. The turning point came with Justice William Brennan's verdict in Samuel Roth's appeal against his conviction for sending obscene materials through the mail. The conviction was upheld but Brennan's pronouncement that 'sex and obscenity are not synonymous' was to change everything.

Even now there is a wide range of opinions as to when sex or the depiction or discussion of sex becomes obscenity but the boundaries have been pushed further and further ever since. But it was The Pill which made sex into a secular religion and brought all the non-reproductive uses of sex into focus

At the same time as The Pill was being developed, Masters and Johnson were carrying out the first thorough scientific studies of the physiology of sex - studies that, despite some inadequacies in details, remain the basis of our knowledge today. Their books, *Human Sexual Response* and *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, corrected many misapprehensions that had been around for centuries and were highly significant in changing attitudes to sex.

Unfortunately, in their efforts to prevent premature, unhealthy or just bothersome sexual activity, parents and parent figures still frequently manage to persuade children that sex is somehow 'dirty', and this attitude tends to persist, if only unconsciously, throughout life. We need to challenge these internal guilt messages: ask ourselves what is bad or dirty about sex? Who does it hurt? What's wrong with pleasure that doesn't harm myself or others? It may help to talk to people who have healthy attitudes. If necessary, we should force ourselves to please ourselves and realise that the heavens will not fall.

So, what should be our attitude to sex? I would put the essentials as follows:

- ? Sex is a natural, normal (very large) part of life. It is not in itself immoral or sinful. Neither is it more divine or spiritual than any other aspect of our lives.
- ? The fact that sex is natural and normal does not mean that any expression of it is okay. There are sound reasons for prohibitions on incest (the first taboo, dating back at least 50,000 years), rape and underage sex. Also, an obsession with sex is no more healthy than an obsession with any other aspect of life.
- ? Again, the fact that sex is natural and normal does not mean that it cannot be enhanced by knowledge, any more than the fact that eating is natural and normal does not mean that we don't need to learn how to cook.
- ? As a corollary to this, scientific research on sex is something that should be encouraged, not vaguely looked down on.
- ? As with cooking, one should not be afraid to experiment.
- ? One should remember that sexual appetites and tastes vary as much as food appetites and tastes and that (as with food) one's sexual practices should be based on the appetites and tastes of oneself and one's partner and not on the pronouncements of various 'experts', the strictures of religionists and others with perverted views of sex, or the uninformed opinions of friends and family.
- ? At the same time, it is well to be aware that some sexual practices may have considerable health risks; these practices should be avoided or essential precautions taken.
- ? We should be as ready to seek help for sexual problems as for any other sort of problem.
- ? Sex is best as a partnership. This means that:

both partners should share equally in the relationship;
there should be true involvement in each other;
each should be able to trust the other;
each should be prepared to give and to receive;
each should be able to communicate their desires and needs to each other;
there should be love between the partners.

? Sensuality enormously enhances sexuality, and vice versa.

? Sex can be funny.