



I

THE WAY OF THE WORLD

Is the world obsessed with sex?

Raquel Welch, a sex symbol in the 1960s and 70s, has said that we have equated happiness in life with as many orgasms as you can possibly pack in. Do you agree?

Poll in the Guardian Newspaper, 13 March 2012

Response: Yes – 73 per cent.

Sex is all around us. It always has been, of course. How else can we explain our presence in this world? Here's a clue: the stork did not bring us. But even the most sceptical observer would have to admit that sex is now front and centre when, even a generation ago, things would have been much more reserved. Take cinema. Films with an 18 certificate can now be shown in mainstream cinemas even when they include explicit real (not simulated) sexual scenes. Such graphic depiction





And Then He Knew Her ...

was unthinkable even twenty years ago. We see similar patterns in other media. In school, sex education is more graphic and direct. Much to our children's amusement and amazement, it really is true that thirty years ago sex and reproduction lessons at our local grammar schools focused just on the rabbits.

Let's be honest: the ability to talk candidly about sex is not necessarily a bad thing. We must recognise that along with more liberal attitudes towards some forms of sex, there are also increasing taboos. Behaviour that was tolerated in the 1970s, for example, is now properly considered inappropriate. Some 1970s 'family' viewing is rightly considered sexist and demeaning today.¹ Sexual abuse is more widely recognised and far more frequently reported. All that is good.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to live in the Western world and not be bombarded by the world's view of sex. It's everywhere. As the Hollywood actress Sharon Stone admits, 'It's not just Hollywood. Everyone is obsessed with sex.'² Christians can react in one of two ways. We could retreat behind the barricades and try to make sure that the subject of sex is one which never passes our lips. As we hope to show you, this kind of head-in-the-sand approach does not do justice to the Bible's view.

1. For example, U.K. sketch shows such as *The Two Ronnies* starring Ronnie Corbett and Ronnie Barker and the entire *Carry On* genre.
2. Writing in, of all places, *The Hindustan Times* (Delhi edition), 13 May 2014.





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Alternatively, we could embrace the candidness of the world and ensure we keep up. We think we need sermons on sex, small groups discussing sex, help-lines, books, counsellors and so on. Some measure of that is possibly helpful, but there is a great danger of making sex *too* important. It's perfectly possible for Christians to idolise sex as much as the world. In this book, we're going to try to put forward a third way, what we think is a robust and healthy biblical view. But first, if we're going to embrace such a view, we need to understand what we're up against.

Why?

It's simple. One of the key challenges that Christians face is that of worldliness. Our calling as followers of Jesus is to reject this pressure and take the narrow way of the Master.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom. 12:2).

Worldliness may be to think too little of sex (though that seems increasingly unusual in today's climate) or too much. Either way, we need to reject *conformity* and embrace *transformity*. Step 1 of that process is understanding the pressures the world places on us when it comes to sex. We need to spot when we are being conformed. So, let us suggest at least five ways the world thinks about sex.



SEX AS A COMMODITY

For many people today, sex is nothing more than a commodity to be traded. It's a cash alternative to be used to bargain, negotiate and blackmail, albeit (it must be said) a particularly enjoyable one. Anecdotally, we heard about one Christian University campus GP complaining that almost 80 per cent of the cases he sees are to do with sexually transmitted diseases.³ University students are trading sex, he said, as keen young boys might trade football stickers.

That admittedly anecdotal evidence is borne out in the largest sexual attitudes survey that is regularly carried out in the U.K. It has been running since 1991 – not even twenty-five years. In that short period, the average number of sexual partners for women aged 16-44 has risen from 3.7 to 7.7 with no sign of a let up in the increase. Although only 1 per cent of 16-44 year olds had chlamydia (a sexually transmitted disease) this proportion rose by a startling 500 per cent for women aged 18-19.⁴ Significantly, respondents to the survey were asked whether one night stands were acceptable. Approximately 10 per cent of those in the 65-74 age group agreed that they were, but this figure rose to 20 per cent in males up to the age of thirty-four.

If the statistics alarm us, they are right to do so. In broad terms, people are much more casual

3. This information came in a private conversation, but we've no reason to doubt the accuracy of the data.

4. The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyle is available for free online at www.natsal.ac.uk and also reported in U.K. Medical Journal *The Lancet*.



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about sex. It has been detached from relationship (something we shall see the Bible condemns) and has become a tradable commodity. For example, a national British newspaper recently reported the case of a woman who had sex with twenty-three men in return for a free holiday.⁵

It's true that research has largely discredited the 'sex as commodity' theory where one partner (typically a woman) only allows another to have sex if he, for example, fulfils certain jobs around the house.⁶ Nevertheless, the increase of casual sex and detachment from relationship (reflected in the increased acceptance of one night stands and average number of sexual partners) demonstrates an attitude towards sex that sees it as something that can be cheaply offered or easily accepted.

Chastity (abstinence from sex) is no longer a virtue, but something to mock or laugh at. The 2005 Hollywood blockbuster *The Forty Year Old Virgin* starring Judd Apatow and Steve Carrell did just that. The opening sentence of the studio blurb encourages us to express amazement at the social freak who is the main star: 'Andy at the age of forty *still* hasn't had sex' (italics added).⁷

In 2011, U.K. Member of Parliament Nadine Dorries introduced a members' bill to include abstinence teaching as part of the sex education

5. *Drugged up reveller bites people in Magaluf*, Daily Star Newspaper (London edition), 4 July 2014.
6. See, for example, the article in *The Independent* Newspaper, *20 times more sex?* by Ally Fogg, 1 February 2014.
7. See www.imdb.com/title/tt0405422 accessed July 2014.



given to girls at state schools. 'We need to let young girls know that to say no to sex when you are under pressure is a cool thing to do,' she said. MP Chris Bryant scorned the idea. 'This is the daftest piece of legislation I have ever seen.'⁸ Such mockery is commonplace in schools and workplaces, not just the House of Commons.

Perhaps, though, the tradable nature of sex is seen most obviously in the proliferation of pornography, especially through the Internet. It would be naïve to suggest that such material has not always been around in whatever media could be used (as a quick trip to see the Greek artefacts in the British Museum will confirm!). Nevertheless, it is also obvious that the access the Internet affords, matched with the privacy it confers, is giving us (and especially men) a view that sex is something which can be bought and sold (or, if possible, obtained for free).

Of course, some might claim that those who participate in producing pornography do so out of free choice. Such an argument may satisfy the consciences of those who view the material, but it is almost certainly untrue and, anyway, it does not – from a Christian point of view – make pornography morally right. And, moreover, the view of sex it portrays does *not* stay in private, even if it begins there. It carries over onto the streets. Literally, in some cases: according to information website www.procon.org prostitution is now only fully prohibited in three Western European countries

8. Reported by the BBC News, 4 May 2011.



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(Norway, Spain, Sweden), though even in these places sex workers and those who traffic them find ways around laws and regulations. It is a well-researched phenomenon that young people are greatly influenced by both the looks and actions of those who appear in pornographic magazines and movies.

SEX AS A RIGHT

Why is sex traded in this way as something that is 'mine' to give, barter or sell? It is in part because the world sees sexual pleasure as an inalienable right. In 2000, the World Health Organisation adopted the World Association of Sexology's Declaration of Sexual Rights.⁹ The declaration contains eleven 'rights' together with a preamble. The statement begins:

Sexual rights are universal human rights based on the inherent freedom, dignity and equality of all human beings.

Some of the statements contain clauses which Christians would heartily endorse. For example, the rights exclude 'all forms of sexual coercion, exploitation and abuse at any time and situations in life.' However, there is also a 'right' to sexual pleasure:

Sexual pleasure, including autoeroticism,¹⁰ is a source of physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual well-being.

9. The full text is available at www.sexology.org

10. A technical way of describing self-pleasure, most commonly masturbation.



Notwithstanding the poor theology (sexual pleasure cannot be a *source* of spiritual well-being as Christians would understand it), this is a remarkable statement. The detailed chapter behind this 'right' (Chapter 8 of the Millennium Declaration) condemns many religious groups for removing any concept of sexual pleasure from the act of sex itself. As we shall see, within the context of marriage, pleasure is an important part of sex. It is an altogether greater step, however, to identify this as a basic human right. Nevertheless, humanity increasingly believes it has the right to personal happiness, and it is perhaps therefore no surprise that the World Health Agency adopted this provision, despite its contentious nature, especially amongst faith groups from the U.S.A.

For singles, such thinking places an increasing emphasis on masturbation, or what is more scientifically described as autoeroticism. Whereas sex education – certainly when we were at school – once focused on the mechanics of sex and sexual reproduction ('how it all works'), the subject is now taught more broadly. Some of that is no doubt welcome – some sex education material stresses the importance of relationship context, something that is also key to a Christian understanding, even though our view of the appropriate context might be different.

However, some of the material taught to our children is solely about self-pleasure. 'Masturbation is encouraged and – shock horror – the clitoris is mentioned' gloats a newspaper report deriding

Christians' objections to one particular school's programme.¹¹ In a world where sexual pleasure is seen as a right in or out of sexual relationships, this is the natural consequence. It is perhaps no accident that the use of pornography amongst teens is so worryingly high. Indeed, it seems almost hypocritical to – on the one hand – bemoan the high incidence of teen use of pornography, as the world sometimes does, whilst – on the other – assert every human's right to self-pleasure.

SEX AS A PRIVATE MATTER

All of this reflects the privatisation of sex. We don't mean that previously sex was a public act in the sense that others could see it. No, historically it has always been an intimately private act, appropriately conducted out of the gaze of others. Rather, we mean that, increasingly, people believe no one else has the right to dictate what is done in the privacy of our own bedrooms. This was a key argument in the liberalisation of homosexuality seen, for example, in the Wolfenden Report published in 1957. This report argued for:

... the importance society and the law ought to give to individual freedom of actions in matters of private morality ... there must remain a realm of private morality and immorality which is, in brief and crude terms, not the law's business.¹²

11. This particular report is from *The Guardian* newspaper (London edition) 8 March 2010, commenting on material produced by Sexual Health Sheffield for schools work.
12. Reported in *The Times* newspaper (London edition) 5 September 1957, p.10.

At this stage, the report was still drawing distinctions between behaviour that was morally acceptable or not. Even some actions considered ‘immoral’ were a private matter, the report argued. Later, that moral distinction was to disappear and most sexual behaviour between consenting adults has now become a matter of personal privacy. Many of the recent objections to the church’s position on homosexuality have been the right of others to dictate what might or might not be done in private.

SEX AS AN EVIL

The argument of privacy, however, is remarkably slippery. Just because an act happens in private does not make it morally right, as indeed the law in the U.K. still recognises. In this maelstrom of sexual activity, it comes as something of a surprise to know that sex is still seen by society as an evil if it takes place in certain contexts. As one U.K. Christian leader has written, ‘Christians tend to see the past fifty years as a time of increasing moral degeneracy, marked by sexual liberation and promiscuity. However the reality is not quite so simple.’¹³ It’s true, there have been great changes made in terms of private practice and what is acceptable. Chief amongst these is the legalisation of homosexuality in 1967 and other practices which were previously considered taboo are now considered acceptable in law, if not always socially.

13. John Stevens, National Director of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, writing at www.john-stevens.com accessed July 2014.



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This is not, however, a one-way street. For most of Queen Victoria's reign, the age of consent was 12, raised to 13 in 1875 and 16 in 1885, where it remains, despite pressure to see it lowered. There are now legal prohibitions for those in certain roles: under the U.K. Sexual Offences Act 2003, it is illegal for a school teacher (or someone in a 'position of trust') to have sex with someone aged 16-18 even though both may be considered as consenting adults. Moreover, sexual abuse is much more widely defined and understood to include practices which might in previous generations have been considered 'fooling about!'¹⁴

So, both legally and socially, we recognise that context is important in defining whether sex is good or bad. The law (at least) recognises that certain relationships cross the boundaries and are unacceptable, if not (in the case of sexual predators) evil. A 22-year-old and a 17-year-old might have a consensual relationship and it may be either legal or illegal depending on their particular role in society.

This confusion does give rise to some anomalies. Recent arguments for a change in the law to allow so-called gay marriage included the argument that those who loved one another should be free to marry. However, the law (and, up to now, society too) recognises that this is not a valid argument. As well as those in positions of trust, close family

14. A further example would be the criminalisation of marital rape, a relatively recent addition to the statute book (early 1990s).

members, for example, are not free to marry.¹⁵ Interestingly, in our apparently liberal sexual society, there is still a strong reaction against those who challenge this status quo: an Australian judge, Garry Nielson, is being investigated for comments he made suggesting that incest could soon become socially acceptable.¹⁶

There is here a point of connection between what Christians believe and what the world believes. As we are going to see, context matters for Christians. What makes sex right or wrong for Christians is the context in which it takes place. We have tended to reduce the morality of sex down to individual acts rather than the setting in which they happen. This places us unnecessarily out of line with the way the world thinks about such matters. If Christians could find ways to speak about context, we would at least be understood by the world – even if we found ourselves disagreeing with the world about where those boundaries were drawn. Perhaps this would enable Christians to be more ‘on the front foot’ when it comes to such discussions?

CONCLUSION? SEX IS A GOD

Where does this all leave us? It leaves us with the idolisation of sex. Sex has become, in Western soci-

15. This is a point that U.K. Government minister Philip Hammond correctly made in a speech at Royal Holloway Student Union. It was pejoratively picked up in the U.K. press with headlines such as ‘Minister likens gay marriage to incest’, see, for example, *The Times* newspaper (London edition), 29 January 2013.

16. Reported in *The Daily Telegraph* newspaper (London edition), 14 July 2014.



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ety at least – a god to be worshipped, followed and adored at all costs. The world will not talk in these terms, of course. Idolatry is a biblical category and – to many people’s ears – a prejudicial one, at that. But one glance at the racks of magazines – whether aimed at men or women – will reveal an obsession with sex that is overwhelming. Books, DVDs, on-line forums are solely devoted to improving sexual techniques as better and better sexual performance is pursued. Medicine will help if you want to increase prowess.¹⁷

‘Was it good for you?’ has become the mantra of the age. People’s aim is to get into bed, and once there to experience intense personal satisfaction almost, it seems, to the exclusion of all else. Women’s magazine *Cosmopolitan* lists ‘Love and Sex’ on its website categories before any other issue (including fashion, beauty and entertainment). This is what people want to know about and pursue.¹⁸

Christians should not perhaps be surprised at this. Most idols of the age are good gifts given by God, but put in a wrong place. Made in the image of its Creator, humanity often has a deep, subconscious understanding that a particular thing is good and worthy – whether it be family or community or food or work. Sex is the same. But there is something deeply disturbing about the idolatry of sex – perhaps more so than any other issue. We believe

17. Medicines like *Viagra* are developed to address serious and real sexual dysfunction. We are not dismissing these. But, like other medications, they are easily abused to provide abnormal sexual ‘highs’.

18. See www.cosmopolitan.co.uk



that this is because of what God designed sex to depict. It is therefore high time we finished surveying the world and turned to what God thinks of this big subject.

CHOOSING A BETTER WAY

Sex, as we shall see, is (in its right context) a good gift from the God who made us. It should not, therefore, surprise us that something pleasurable and intrinsically good is appreciated by the world, even though it has been hijacked so comprehensively. Moreover, as attitudes to sex change (which they seem to do with increasing rapidity) Christians must be prepared to defend a biblical view of sex that is increasingly out of step with the way the world thinks and acts.

We are in two particular dangers. The first danger is that, retreating into our own tribal world, we will become overwhelmingly negative about sex in a way that is sub-biblical. Sex is dirty, unmentionable and should certainly not be pleasurable! The stereotypes of our forefathers is that they thought this way about sex. Perhaps many middle-aged Christians live with this kind of emotional baggage.

It seems to us that, though this is a real danger, it is increasingly unlikely that this is the trap into which Christians might fall today. A second, more immediate danger is that we will be swamped by the world, giving into it and letting it shape our thinking. Even within evangelicalism we must ac-



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cept this is a present temptation.¹⁹ Here, then, is the reason we have written this book. We've said enough about the book of the world. We now need to consider a better source: the book of the Word. For there we find a remarkably robust and positive view of sex.

19. Indeed, Mark and Grace Driscoll's book on marriage, *Real Marriage* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2012) contains a contentious chapter (chapter 10) which gives Christian couples 'permission' to engage in some surprising (to us, anyway) sexual activities. As Denny Burk helpfully writes, there are 'a whole range of pastoral problems that might be provoked by chapter 10 of the Driscolls' book.' Burk, D. *The Meaning of Sex* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2013), p.121.

