

# Sex and Nonsense

## by Patricia Marshall

The present generation of parents and other educators faces a particular problem: having been brought up for the most part with little or no sex instruction, having been protected to some extent by the pressures of social convention, they find themselves faced by a generation of young men and women who talk freely about sex, who say openly that they are not prepared to accept the traditional teaching of the Churches with regard to sexual behaviour and for whom the fear of an illegitimate pregnancy is no longer the deterrent to fornication that it may have been in the past. To make matters even more perplexing, the young men have long hair which used to be thought a symbol of homosexuality and the young women wear mini-skirts which is confusing for a generation of men accustomed to thinking of the exposed female thigh as a non-verbal communication of a specific kind. What are they to do? Judging by the number of books currently flooding the market, at least part of the answer seems to be 'read a book about sex' for, with no statistical evidence, I'd be prepared to guess that it is this generation rather than the one at risk that is doing most of the reading—perhaps the others are too busy with the field work.

The first of these three paperbacks,<sup>1</sup> *Sense and Nonsense about Sex*, purports to be written for teenagers, and more specifically appears to be directed to Protestant teenagers in youth clubs, but I find it hard to imagine any young man or woman actually reading it. The opening sentence would deter most of them—'The two sexes are as different as different can be, and that makes all the difference'. If they did manage to swallow that, they would find a few pages further on that 'Boys are not all alike. . . . Some are silly, insecure clowns, others are sincere, dedicated Christians.' Suppressing a desire to add that some are silly, insecure Christians and others sincere, dedicated clowns, one continues to learn that 'Some adults are hasty and inconsiderate, it's true. But other adults believe in young people and enjoy working with them in all sorts of projects.' This is the first clue. Clarification comes when, talking about the 'wholesome discussion of sex', the authors say that this is usually 'between young people and some worthy adult'—They cannot seriously be addressing

<sup>1</sup>*Sense and Nonsense about Sex*, by Evelyn & Sylvanus M. Duvall. Lutterworth Press. 5s. *Living with Sex—the Students' Dilemma*, by Richard F. Hettlinger. S.C.M. Press. 12s. 6d. *Sex in Christianity and Psychoanalysis*, by William Graham Cole. Oxford University Press. 12s. 6d.

young people in these terms and indeed one discovers the addressee in the next paragraph—‘The good leader is not shocked by frank questions or annoyed by standards that differ from his.’ This, then, must surely be a book for (and by?) youth leaders and one presumably designed to help them to help young people to cope with their sexuality. (The ‘good leader’ one hopes would have enough sense to translate what the authors say into terms that the youth he is leading might find more attractive, eschewing such terms as ‘wholesome’ ‘God-given’—why is this term reserved for the sexual function? can it be that sex is thought so intrinsically filthy that it needs exorcizing in this way?—‘frank’—it’s probably political communiqués that give this word its overtones of mealy-mouthed dishonesty—‘smutty’—a grown-up sneer word for what the young find hilarious—and also taking care with the very popular comparison of sex and fire—necessary and good but dangerous and to be controlled, true enough as far as it goes but I don’t think most normal people find fire such fun.)

It’s too easy, though, to make fun of this book and this is a pity because it contains much of value, much that might encourage a young person already committed to, and trying to maintain, Christian standards of sexual behaviour to do so. The authors recognize that ‘a changed and changing world may make older standards *seem* no longer adequate’ but they never appear to try to understand the very many young people who think that these standards *are* no longer adequate.

Richard F. Hettlinger, on the other hand, most emphatically does try. *Living with Sex—the Student’s Dilemma* begins: ‘A friend of mine who is chaplain of a co-educational college in New England recently had a visit from a popular and attractive male student (who happened to be the son of a minister) with a lively reputation for sexual activity on the campus. Girls found him irresistible and he was leaving a trail of broken hearts (and more) behind him.’ A chaplain himself (English, but at an American college), he continues in this somewhat verbose, racy, buttonholing style to show himself genuinely concerned to see the problem from the student’s point of view. The precise dilemma he is concerned with is stated by the student already mentioned who, while admitting that his conduct is irresponsible, says ‘the problem is there’s absolutely nothing I’d rather do’. Hettlinger rightly exposes the double-faced morality of contemporary society and is very ready to engage with the more responsible student who, though not prepared to be indiscriminately promiscuous, will yet say that ‘love makes it right’. The Churches come under heavy fire for their anti-sex attitudes, where intercourse is somewhat grudgingly permitted as an unfortunate necessity in marriage and the only help offered to the unmarried is contained in statements such as this from a current Protestant marriage handbook—‘It is best to keep every sort of sexual excitement towards your

fiancée under complete control since it is not good for her'. Faced with such pronouncements the student is likely to conclude, he says, 'that religious leaders have lost all touch with reality [and he] will certainly look elsewhere for the guidance he desperately needs—probably to *Playboy*'.

The Playboy philosophy of Heffner is evidently a large influence in an American student's life. Hettlinger examines it, as far as I can judge, fairly, asking in conclusion whether, by presenting sex as 'one of the ingredients' (and here he is quoting Heffner) in *Playboy's* 'total entertainment and service package for the young urban male', Heffner is not disregarding or disguising the full psychological depths of sexuality. (It is typical of the author that he asks 'whether', rather than states 'that', and I feel that, for him, this is genuine and not simply a cunning way of making statements without seeming to.)

He argues strongly and, if you need convincing, I would say convincingly that love alone can give sex its full meaning and suggests that 'we are not doing what comes naturally if we fail to respect the nature of others'. He defines 'natural' (a chameleon word that needs definition nearly every time it is used) in terms of 'unique potentiality for personal relationships and love' and in the light of this redefinition goes on to discuss petting to orgasm, premarital intercourse, masturbation and male homosexuality. This is clearly a book written by a man for male students (which may, in part, explain what occasionally seems to a reviewer of the opposite sex an overeagerness to show that his reading is as wide in 'pornography' as in theology) but his chapter on the Girls' Point of View, if a little overgenerous to the girls, is a good one.

In a postscript for the British edition Hettlinger explains what had been puzzling me from the outset: why sex should be considered the *students'* dilemma. Attendance at college appears to be the norm in America and 'student' there is virtually synonymous with 'teenager' here. The great majority, he says, are 'enjoying for the first time a healthy independence not only from parental controls but also from restrictions of socially acceptable and largely formal church-going. Inevitably . . . it is against antisexualism hallowed by the churches that their revolt is directed.' He also notes that while Americans 'talk about and use sex freely in advertising, in literature . . . and in entertainment . . . the serious discussion of sex in public has long been accepted in Britain where it would have been impossible in the United States'. And, comparing Kinsey's figures for premarital intercourse with Schofield's, observes that while 70.5 per cent of American men have this experience by the late teens (Schofield 34 per cent) the incidence for girls is surprisingly lower in America (Kinsey 13 per cent, Schofield 17 per cent). The significance and causality of this divergence, however, elude me.

This is a discursive book in which, though the author's views are made fairly clear, he does not attempt—in fact rather flies from—

laying down rigid criteria for sexual behaviour: a book which might make people think rather than react. Footnote addicts, however, will be maddened by the fact that the four hundred or so footnotes are all at the back of the book and there is no way of knowing whether one is going to get half a page of interesting comment or just *'ibid.'*

If books are sold to people who look at the first page to see what they are like, all three of these books would give a fair idea. *Sex in Christianity and Psychoanalysis* opens discouragingly—'Western civilization is like an Oriental rug'. The author examines the interpretations of sex of Jesus and Paul, Augustine, Aquinas and the Council of Trent, moves on to Luther and Calvin, and thence to contemporary Catholicism and Protestantism. Up to Calvin he is interesting in exposing the 'thread of Hellenistic dualism' (in the oriental rug) and in his examination of the treatment of sex in the Bible and after. (Reading Egner's *Birth Regulation and Catholic Belief* concurrently, one cannot avoid noticing the similarity of their quotations from Augustine and Aquinas—is there somewhere a book of quotations designed to assist those who wish to discredit these writers?) The chapters on contemporary writers are not so good; the book was written in 1956 and the major interest is to note just how outdated they now appear. In passing, however, it is interesting to observe how very angry the business of primary and secondary ends of marriage and Catholic teaching on contraception seem to make the Protestant author.

After an examination of the views of Sigmund Freud, Cole turns to contemporary psychoanalysts and is here a great deal less compelling. Indeed, only the obligation to review prevented considerable skipping of the, to me, deeply tedious variations of Karen Horney, Franz Alexander and Sandor Rado. The fault is probably mine but I never quite saw what the conflict between psychoanalysis and Christianity was supposed to be.

The author then comes to what he terms his 'reconstruction'. This is by far the most interesting section of the book and people hard pressed for time could well confine themselves to this final chapter. He examines the implications of three classic Christian doctrines for the interpretation of sex, namely, the Creation, Original Sin and the Redemption. 'A serious acceptance of the fact of creation demands a positive attitude toward the human body. . . . It is a temple wherein to sing the praises of God.' Original Sin is an 'estrangement' from God and from neighbour after which 'genuine community is no longer possible'. ('Anxiety is the root of sin', he says and distinguishes neurotic anxiety, which the analyst can treat, from existential anxiety—about death, meaninglessness and condemnation—which will remain with analyst and patient alike after treatment. He urges the non-judgmental attitude of the psychoanalyst on the followers of Christ who said to the woman

taken in adultery, 'Neither do I condemn thee'.) 'Genuine inner integrity, with the accompanying ability to take existential anxiety into the self in full awareness, and yet go on in spite of it, can be achieved, from the Christian point of view, only on the basis of trust and love, the *sine qua non* of the redemption.' 'The resulting inner integrity renders possible genuine community, human relationships based on mutual respect and mature love.' This sounds—and is—splendid, but then, suddenly, as though one had changed authors in mid-dream, one finds him saying: 'So long as sexual arousal is not an end in itself, as in pornography, there is nothing evil or sinful in the fact of mutual attraction.' Maybe this needed saying in America in 1956, but it sounds like an eerie echo from one of the older manuals of moral and pastoral theology in Britain in 1967 and, in the end, one is driven to conclude that this is a book both by and for a minister of religion.