

Young People and... You Know What

Eroding the New Paganism

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TODAY, if you're looking for some simon-pure young saint like Maria Goretti or John Berchmans, try another galaxy. The House Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families estimates that, in future years, we will continue to have a minimum of one million teenage pregnancies annually, with 400,000 of them aborted and about a half-million live births. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, of the 3.7 million children born in 1983, 700,000 had unmarried parents—one fifth—and that was ten years ago. In the 1970 census, there were a half million unmarried-couple households; ten years later, there were four times as many.

Nor do those statistics indicate how many young people engage in sexual intercourse without causing a pregnancy, but periodic surveys are disheartening. John Gasirowski in *Adolescent Sexuality and Sex Education*, quotes several: intercourse before 18—56 percent boys, 43 percent girls; acceptability of coitus with someone for whom you have no particular affection—27 percent of both sexes; "I feel premarital intercourse is immoral"—(1965) 33 percent boys, 70 percent girls, (1980) 17 percent boys, 25 percent girls. Of 75 health clinics associated with schools across the country, 20 percent dis-

pense birth control devices, and 50 percent issue prescriptions for them. The accessibility of condoms on request from city schools shows that the agency which was intended to prepare moral citizens for our society has not only forfeited that mandate as no longer feasible but has, equivalently, become an accessory to teenage sexual nonchalance.

When those of us past our prime look back even as recently as 25 years, those statistics are pretty startling. And if the Waltons' children could somehow be transported from the Depression 30s to today, they'd be stunned by the trivialization of sexuality—and humanity—to which we have ever-so-gradually adapted ourselves, to the point that, like litter and graffiti, we no longer even notice it unless it's especially blatant. Madonna is a woman who has tested precisely that tolerance, just one bolder step further into paganism each time.

What triggered this steady sea-change which upended our collective conscience from the nearly-puritan to the nearly-pagan? The agents of this metamorphosis are so obvious as to be clichés. "Round up the usual suspects": television (programs, commercials, even sports and the news!), movies, *Playboy* and its legion of imitators, self-absorbed rock lyrics, Calvin Klein slick-paper ads and billboards, the *National Enquirer*.

An October 1992 article in *Newsweek* on "The Cultural Elite" says that 59 percent of those surveyed believed the media "are selling their products rather than pushing their values," which shows the gullibility of those surveyed. In selling their prod-

ucts, the media are of course “pushing their values”: infantile craving, without which they’d be out of business.

Those surveyed also believed all forms of the media want to reach the widest possible acceptance and therefore go for “the least common demonimator,” what Freud called the id, the animal in us, which is about as common as you can get. “Humanity” covers a spectrum from almost completely id-beasts who have hardly activated their unique human potential (Time Square pimps, Central Park wilders, Mafia hitmen) stretching through most law-and-order folk to those who have activated their human potential probably to the level of saints (Dorothy Day, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, Terry Anderson).

But it is in the best interest of anyone connected with the media and its products that that evolution never take place, that the audience’s receptivities remain at the level of perpetual self-absorbed adolescence. Their perfect pupil, product, and paragon is *Cheers’* Sam Malone.

Yet just as with Watergate and My Lai, there is no single Big Brother or Zurich Committee at whom to point the finger. Nor could any fair-minded critic assert that the motive behind media manipulation of young minds is expressly to corrupt them. Their motive is, pure and simple, money—which, in the present culture, is enough to justify any means whatever. Media-financed studies of their own effect on young people’s acceptance of violence and sexual manipulation always show “no *conclusive* evidence”—which one suspects actually does justify themselves to themselves in their own minds. They

have a vested interest in the outcome. And they also have a point: if chastity, thrift, and self-forgetfulness sold air-time, recordings, and jeans, they'd give us those. Like Hitler, they simply saw which way the parade was heading and got in front of it.

Little likelihood any power—not even government, which is inextricably enmeshed with the media powers—will be able to stem the tide of moral devaluation, nor that some Oliver Cromwell has much chance of bulling his way to power again. What then can those of us who care about the humanity—not to mention the Christianity—of our young (and ourselves) do about the New Paganism?

The first step is to understand—and accept—the reality of the radical psychological differences between those of us over forty and those of us under forty. Only then can we devise ways to challenge the unquestioned certitudes of our young about sexuality, the purpose of human life, and the paths to human fulfillment.

You Were Never My Age

People under forty have grown up in a world nearly as different from their elders' world as Babylon was from Salem. Their in-built resistance to any unbiased consideration of traditional morality is an obstacle which religious educators (which *eo ipso* means all parents) must understand. Otherwise, they are preaching to an audience with its fingers in its ears.