

Respect Life

Pornography: Just Because You're Not Looking Doesn't Mean It Will Disappear

By
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Talking or reading about pornography makes many people uncomfortable. Admittedly, the topic can be discomfiting. Some do not express their personal views about it lest they be considered prudish or old fashioned. Others are apathetic about the problem because they are quite unfamiliar with hardcore or child pornography. Some are reluctant to act because of rightful concern about important First Amendment freedoms. Others hesitate to speak out because, frankly, the subject is embarrassing and the cause unpopular.

However, the production, distribution and consumption of pornography have become problems of major proportions in our society. To say it succinctly, pornography is eroding the quality of life in our communities to such an extent that we can no longer ignore it or deal with it in superficial or peripheral ways.

As faith-filled persons, we are opposed to all forms of pornography. As the title of this article implies, however, I am focusing attention here on *hardcore* and *child pornography*, materials which are illegal in the United States. Obscenity (*hardcore pornography*) and *child pornography* link sex and violence as appropriate partners in human intimacy.

While obscenity and child pornography are illegal, all forms of pornography run counter to the Judeo-Christian vision of the human person, human sexuality and the social good.

In this article, my purpose is primarily educational and motivational. I will (1) explore the theological basis of our opposition to pornography, (2) describe the harmful effects of pornography on the human person and society, and (3) review some guiding principles and legislation that help shape our response to obscenity and child pornography.

Pornography Runs Counter to Our Religious Tradition

The theological foundation of our opposition to pornography begins with the dignity and sacredness of every human life. As stewards of creation, we have the responsibility to care for — not to abuse — all of God's creatures, including the gift of each precious human life.

Some look upon pornography as an individual rather than a social problem, one that is somehow an unfortunate by-product of human freedom which, nevertheless, must be protected. However, pornography also has important social dimensions.

Human sexuality is an expression of personhood and the human call to intimacy. As Pope John Paul II has pointed out so clearly, sexuality is not simply "an attribute" of but is *intrinsic* to human personhood; it is a constitutive element of our humanity and identity.

Pornography, especially obscenity and child pornography, erodes human dignity, enslaves rather than liberates persons, and runs counter to the true meaning and role of sexuality in human life. Its importance is cast in clearer perspective when it is viewed along with other influences which threaten or diminish human life.

Among these issues are such *life-threatening* realities as genetic manipulation, abortion, capital punishment, modern warfare, and euthanasia.

In addition, attention must be paid to *life-diminishing* issues, such as prostitution, sexism, racism, and pornography. Each is a distinct problem, requiring its own moral analysis. Nonetheless, understanding that they all contribute in some way to a diminishment of human dignity and a deterioration of the social environment provides a theological foundation for more specific reflection and concrete action.

I emphasize the linkage among life-threatening and life-diminishing issues because I am convinced that successful resolution of any of these issues is dependent upon the broader attitude within society regarding respect for human life and concern for the common good. A healthy change of attitude, in turn, can lead to a change of policies and practices in our society.

Pornography Harms the Human Person and Society

Human life is diminished when women or men, and especially children, are exploited in the production of pornography, whether in print, film, or videotape. The 1986 Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography and other studies document the harm and violence directed against individuals in the production of pornography.

Diminishment of human dignity also occurs in the lives of those who purchase or use pornography. This diminishment is a serious concern because pornography is not so much an outlet for the baser instincts of the human person as it is a stimulant. Violence, degradation, and humiliation are simply not compatible with the true meaning and value of human sexuality.

Nonetheless, pornography, like prostitution, seems to have a permanent attraction for some people. Such persons must be treated with professional and pastoral sensitivity, but their plight simply underscores the need for effective public policy in regard to pornography.

Legal Recourse

What then are we to do about pornography? When we ask that question, we touch upon the problem of social freedom, an issue that is as complex as it is essential.

It is important to strike a balance between freedom and restraint in

society. That is why it is important to acknowledge that, whereas morality and law are clearly related, they also need to be differentiated. Although the premises of law are found in moral principles, the scope of law is more limited.

Moral principles govern personal and social human conduct and cover as well interior acts and motivation. Civil statutes, on the other hand, govern public order and concern only external acts and values that are formally social.

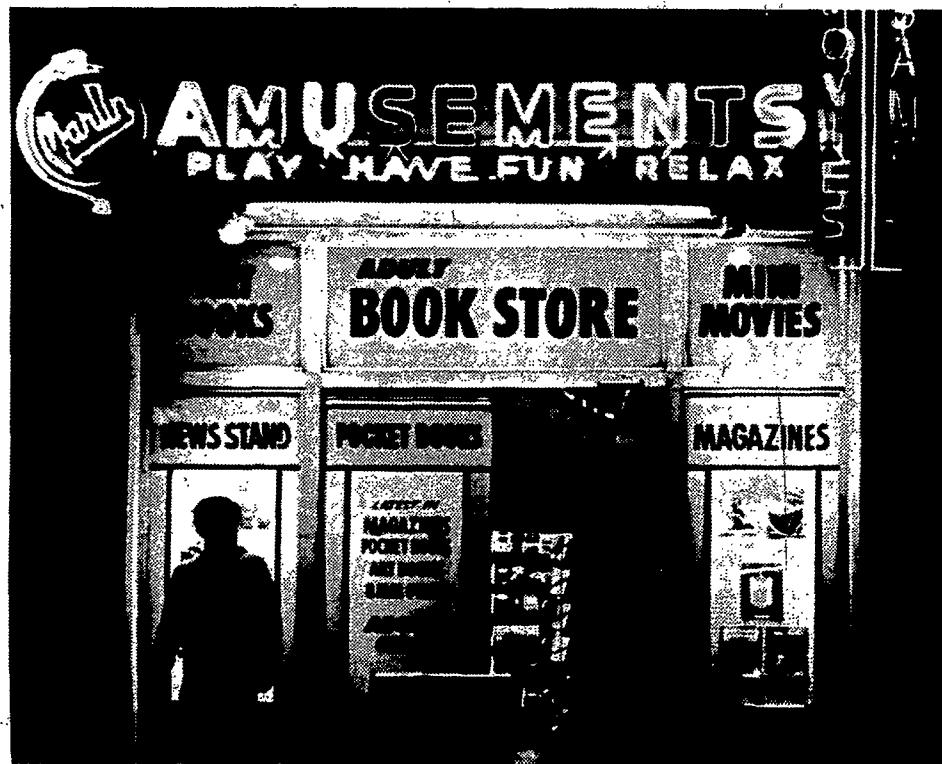
As we consider the relationship of morality and law, let us be clear that we are not embarking on a campaign of censorship. We value and respect the First Amendment. We are well aware that this portion of the Bill of Rights guarantees both freedom of religion and freedom of expression.

Having said this, I hasten to affirm that, within the framework of the Constitution, as well as existing legis-

lation, can be changed to the extent that it encounters well-reasoned arguments as well as Christian witness on a personal level. Christian witness includes fidelity to our vision and values in our everyday lives. We need, in short, to stand for positive values and not only against negative ones.

The National Council of Catholic Women has long taken a leading role in the battle against pornography. The emergence of groups like the National Coalition Against Pornography, Morality in Media, Citizens for Decency Through Law, and the National Coalition for Children's Justice indicates that more and more citizens are becoming alarmed about the growing presence and increasing virulence of pornography in our society.

The establishment in 1986 of the Religious Alliance Against Pornography (RAAP) — an unprecedented coalition of Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Mormon churches, as



lation and possible changes in legislation, there is a great deal that can be done to combat obscenity and child pornography — much more than is presently the case. The Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography is very helpful in delineating the possibilities. For example, it points out that state and federal laws against child and hardcore pornography in many cases may be strengthened and stringently enforced without violating the protections of the First Amendment. In many places adequate law exists and officials may only need the prompting of concerned citizens to enforce that law. In other places, new or revised legislation may be needed to eliminate child and hardcore pornography without violating the protections of the First Amendment.

A crucial element in enforcing existing legislation and in drafting new laws is public opinion. Public opinion about the need to oppose pornography

well as representatives of the Jewish community — testifies that people of all faiths share the conviction that hardcore and child pornography undermine human dignity, family life, and a healthy society.

The issues addressed in this article are important because they concern human life and dignity. They command attention at this moment in history because, with the support of public opinion, citizen groups and governmental agencies have the influence and the power to rid our society of pornographic materials which corrupt human life and cheapen human dignity. As people of faith, our stewardship of human life and commitment to human dignity compels our opposition to pornography.

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