



PORNOGRAPHY

- "The Victims of Pornography"—analysis by ALC Office of Church in Society (1985)
- "Pornography"—a statement of The American Lutheran Church (1974)

1. The Victims of Pornography

An analysis commended by the Standing Committee, Office of Church in Society, The American Lutheran Church, as a supplement (1985) to "Pornography," a statement of comment and counsel addressed to members of ALC congregations for study and action as they deem appropriate (1974).

1. Introduction

1.1 In 1974 the Seventh General Convention of The American Lutheran Church adopted a statement of comment and counsel entitled "Pornography." In this statement, pornography is equated with obscenity and defined as depicting erotic behavior in ways deliberately intended to stimulate sexual excitement. ALC members are urged to "give thoughtful consideration to issues involved in pornography" and to "offer their counsel, their prayers, their support for what is good and wholesome, and their energies to correct what is evil and destructive in public policies dealing with pornography."

1.2 Since the 1974 statement was adopted, both the nature of pornography and the social climate in the United States have changed. On one hand, commercial sex-oriented materials and services have increased in volume, in variety of media used, and in brutality. The content of sex-oriented materials has become more varied. They now include graphic, explicit portrayals of genitals, sex acts among all combinations of participants (e.g. male/female, adult/child, group sex, child/child, with animals), masturbation with foreign objects such as guns, sadomasochism, torture, rape, murder, dismemberment, sexual domination/submission/humiliation, sexual parodies and caricatures of generally respected entities (e.g. government, law, church, scripture, sacraments), and graphic portrayals of illegal acts (e.g. a patient being sexually abused by both doctor and nurse during an office visit, a child being molested, a parishioner being sexually abused by a clergyman).

1.3 On the other hand, the social climate in the United States of America has become both more tolerant of sexual expression and less tolerant of it. What was once called "pornography" is now common fare in movies and television. However, several groups in our society—in the face of increased documentation of rape, incest, murder, bondage, torture, family violence, and discrimination against women—have become unwilling to accept explicit sexual material as harmless or victimless. Certain kinds of sexual material have been shown by scientific studies and crime analysis to have contributed to the commission of crimes against women and children, perpetrated mostly by men who purchase and consume such material.¹ Interestingly, some studies have shown that mildly erotic sexual materials appear to have the effect of *lessening* aggression by men against women.²

1.4 The present document seeks to call attention to these and other considerations for the purpose of aiding ALC members in their discussions, decisions, and actions regarding sexually oriented material.

2. Definitions of Pornography

2.1 The word "pornography" is compiled from two Greek words, "pornay" and "graphay." "Pornay" is a form of "peraymi," which means "to sell," usually in reference to a slave or harlot for hire. "Graphay" refers to that which is written, inscribed, or pictured. "Pornography," then, literally means picturing or describing prostitutes, with the connotation of an unequal slave/master relationship. Such portrayals have occurred throughout human history.

2.2 A 1973 United States Supreme Court decision offered these guidelines to define sexual obscenity: a) the work, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interests; b) the work depicts or describes, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct defined by applicable state law; and c) the work, taken as a whole, lacks serious literary, artistic or scientific value.³ These guidelines have proven to be difficult to apply to particular cases or items.⁴

2.3 The 1974 ALC statement defines pornography as "material that depicts or describes erotic behavior in ways deliberately intended to stimulate sexual excitement." Some therapists now argue that stimulating sexual excitement can be therapeutic and materials that assist that purpose need not always be classified as "pornographic."

2.4 City governments in Indianapolis and Minneapolis have recently tried to differentiate pornographic material from erotic material, even though the two may sometimes coincide. Their tentative definitions also try to differentiate pornography from obscenity, even though they, too, may coincide. Rather, these efforts would define pornography in terms of a violation of civil rights, that is, as sexually explicit descriptions or portrayals of women or children in dehumanized, mutilated, animalistic, submissive, distorted,

sadistic and/or masochistic positions through which women or children are placed and kept in a subordinate role and status (paraphrased). Pornography is thus defined as demeaning and destructive in its portrayal of women and children. Its major focus is physical and psychological violence against others.

2.5 Erotic material, in differentiation from pornography, may depict arousing, sexually explicit relationships between consenting people of equal status and respect for each other.⁵ Erotic portrayals need not be demeaning and can be edifying and therapeutic. They can also contribute to dramatic presentations and be aesthetically pleasing. Yet, some erotic portrayals are demeaning of all participants, by virtue of their casual, disdainful or trivial attitude toward human nature and human sexuality.

2.6 Obscenity refers to any excess, not necessarily sexual, that is an offense against decency. It can also refer to sexual portrayals which, on the whole, appeal to prurient interests. Obscenity is based on a value judgment which is difficult to prove in court.⁶

2.7 Definitions vary in focus and legal force. The more vague and inclusive the definition, the less useful it is as a tool in controlling offensive materials and services. Yet, a narrow definition, such as focusing on violence against women and children as portrayed in sexual settings, does not address other important questions which explicit sexual materials may raise for Christians, such as sexually explicit parodies and misrepresentations of Christian sacraments, scriptures and people. Perhaps several narrow definitions are needed at this time, in view of the complexity of both content and media used by purveyors of sexual goods and services.

3. Arguments for Allowing or Prohibiting Explicit Sexual Materials

3.1 There are several types of arguments which have been used by various people in favor of or against sexual materials considered pornographic by certain segments of the population. These arguments are based on different criteria, assume different definitions, and serve different purposes. Some of these arguments can be summarized as follows:⁷

3.2 Scientific studies form the basis for one type of argument, including that of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography (1970). The Commission concluded that scientific studies showed little evidence that the use of pornography (as they defined it) is harmful to the user or to society, and therefore few restraints should be placed on its dissemination. Countering this argument are more recent scientific studies of Victor B. Cline (University of Utah), Edward Donnerstein (University of Wisconsin), and many others,⁸ which indicate that consumption of certain types of violent sexual portrayals does have a negative effect on both the individual user and society. Therefore, they contend certain verifiably harmful types of materials which combine violence and sex should be controlled.

3.3 A second type of argument bases its case on the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which insures freedom of speech. It is maintained by some civil liberties advocates that any abridgement of freedom to communicate—for example, controlling freedom to communicate any and all forms of sexual expressions—would jeopardize the freedom of all other fields of communication. For that reason, even the worst “pornography” must be tolerated, so that censorship does not become a precedent. Those who argue against this stance point out that customary interpretations of the First Amendment have excluded certain forms of expression, such as prohibitions against libel, slander, sedition, perjury, advocating illegal acts, false advertising, copyright violations, etc.⁹ The First Amendment does not guarantee absolute freedom to express everything in all cases. Arguments have also been made that the rights of some adults to choose an option should be balanced by the rights of other adults and children not to have that option thrust upon them unwillingly, or to have any resulting harm inflicted upon them. One person’s freedom must be balanced by another person’s freedom and by responsibility.

3.4 A third type of argument bases its support for allowing distribution of sexually explicit materials upon therapeutic considerations. Some counselors and social scientists have argued that, while many people find what they call pornography distasteful, it should be available because it serves as a sexual substitute or outlet for lonely, maladjusted, and confined persons, and may serve as a safety valve for society.¹⁰ It may also serve as a stimulus for rejuvenating jaded relationships, and help solve a variety of sexual problems. Arguing against these claims are those who agree that the carefully structured use of erotica in therapeutic settings can be an aid to overcoming sexual dysfunctions, but that the distortions, violence, and callousness towards human dignity present in much of today’s commercial sexual merchandise does more harm than good, *especially* to sexually maladjusted and immature people who purchase such goods and services instead of seeking professional help.

3.5 A fourth group of arguments in favor of allowing the publication of sex-oriented materials is based on the desire to promote the publication of its author’s or publisher’s underlying philosophy.¹¹ Some people believe that the ideology of sex merchants will help to liberate society from certain “repressive” influences, such as religion, the nuclear family, sexual taboos, age discrimination (i.e., children should be allowed to choose having sex with adults), romanticized love, and a search for beauty and dignity. These are seen as having caused undue restraint and distress, and thus must be changed to a more liberal configuration which freely allows sexual contact between people of all ages, family relationships, sexual orientation, etc. Those arguing against such positions do not see the sex merchant’s emphasis on secularism, non-committed relationships, ugliness, violence, hatred, and routine sex

techniques as an improvement over previous options. They see such an approach as an insult to God, to human dignity, and to decency.

3.6 A fifth argument in favor of allowing the dissemination of all sexually explicit goods and services is profitability. In 1981, for example, the sex-oriented industry grossed almost as much money as the legitimate record and movie industries combined.¹² The argument is that society must want this product if it pays such a high price for it. Those who argue against violent sexual portrayals point out that saleability alone should not determine the availability of a product or service, especially if monetary profit for some is gained through physical, spiritual, and social harm to others, both individually and collectively.

3.7 One challenge that stands before Christians who would deal responsibly with sexual materials and services is that of becoming informed as to what the various people are selling: A positive attitude toward sexuality? A worldview in conflict with Christianity? A (possibly) protected expression of views? A (harmless) entertainment option? A danger to society and its citizens? Part of the challenge is to evaluate the Christian options, to see whether we are doing our best, or whether more needs to be done in teaching healthy sexuality, nurturing spirituality, forming human dignity and mutual respect.

4. Biblical/Theological Considerations

4.1 Biblical theology on the whole understands sexuality positively as a gift from God (Gen. 1:26-31). Some biblical passages (e.g., Song of Solomon) can be considered erotic in a positive sense, in that they celebrate the beauty of the human body and the creativity of human love and sexuality. Biblical theology affirms marriage as the appropriate arena for such sexual expression, but also affirms the option of remaining single (1 Cor. 7:36-40). The basis of biblical covenant theology is the building up of human dignity and respect for all people (Ex. 6:2-9, "I have heard the groanings of the people . . . I will bring you out from under the burdens"; 1 Peter 2:9-10, "Once you were no people, but now you are God's people."). It is a theology of grace in which God redeems and accepts the unrighteous, i.e., all people (1 Cor. 6:9-11, "The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God . . . and such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified . . ."; Mt. 21:28-32, ". . . the tax collectors and harlots go into the kingdom of God . . ."). It views all people as blessed (Gen. 1:27, "God created male and female, and blessed them"), all believers as members of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 6:13-20) and temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17). Biblical theology recognizes that demeaning behavior is inappropriate for the people of God to perpetrate upon others or to accept for themselves (1 Cor. 6:10-20; 8:9-13; 10:23-24; 12:4-26; 13:1-13; Lk. 9:46-48; 10:38-42).

4.2 Biblical theology speaks out against such practices as incest and the public or inappropriate display or viewing of nakedness in a way that would

demean someone (Gen. 3:7-11; 9:20-23; Ex. 20:26; 28:42; Lev. 18:6-30). Similarly, biblical theology warns against lust (Mt. 5:27-30), against sexual relations with animals (Lev. 18:23) or prostitutes (1 Cor. 6:15-16), against various bizarre relationships (Rom. 1:18-32) and against murder (Ex. 20:13; Mt. 5:21; Jas. 2:8-13), practices which are vividly portrayed and implicitly promoted by some commercial sexually explicit material.

4.3 Biblical theology has been ambivalent toward the treatment and status of women. On one hand, women in the Bible are affirmed as leaders and supporters of the religious community (e.g., Deborah, a prophetess and military leader, Judges 4-5; Phoebe, Paul's assistant and deaconess at Cenchreae, Rom. 16:1-2; the Samaritan woman who witnessed to Jesus' identity and thereby converted a whole town, Jn. 4:4-42; women as first witness to the resurrection, Mt. 28:1-10; all women, who are viewed as equal partners in Christ, Gal. 3:28; etc.).

4.4 On the other hand, there are elements in biblical writings which have been used to justify subordination, disrespect, humiliation, rape, and brutal violence against women (e.g., "Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord," Eph. 5:22; "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness," 1 Tim. 2:11-12; "Women should keep silent in the churches," 1 Cor. 14:34; "But he would not listen to her, and being stronger than she, he forced her, and lay with her. Then Amnon hated her with a very great hatred . . .," 2 Sam. 13:1-22; "Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; ravish them and do what seems good to you, but against this man do not do such a vile thing . . . [after his concubine was found dead] he took a knife, and laying hold of his concubine he divided her, limb by limb, into 12 pieces and sent her throughout the territory of Israel," Judges 19:11—21:25¹³).

4.5 These sections are part of the biblical canon and some are read to the present day in our churches. For some hearers they perpetuate the perception that women can legitimately be treated as subordinates, victims, and sex objects—the property of men. Therefore, Christians cannot entirely exempt themselves from the guilt of promoting violence against women. We cannot place all blame on purveyors of pornography. Even such a biblical passage as the injunction to keep silent is potentially damaging to women, since "silenced" women may be reluctant to speak out against sexual abuse and humiliation.¹⁴

5. Conclusions

5.1 In light of the preceding considerations, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the responses and actions Christians might consider:

5.2 Human sexuality itself is a gift from God; portrayals of respectful, even erotically explicit, sexual encounters may be edifying. The development of

a healthy sexuality within the church is one way to counteract the more damaging portrayals in the commercial sex-oriented material.

5.3 Portrayals of sexual encounters which demean and humiliate women or children or men, which undermine human dignity, or which promote hatred or violence, should be seriously challenged by direct action and by indirect education, since such portrayals are damaging to all parties—to the models who pose for such material, to the reader or viewer or hearer, and to the members of the general public who become victims when consumers of explicit materials seek to act out scenarios they have seen, read, or heard.

5.4 Focusing on the positive and affirming aspects of biblical theology will help Christians gain self-esteem and self-confidence, so they will be able to resist appeals to pose for, purchase, or act out materials that are sexually demeaning.

5.5 Focusing on the goodness of God's gift of sexuality in positive sex education can help Christians accept their sexuality as healthy and wholesome, leaving no need to turn for stimulation to sex-oriented materials which demean others and promote violence.

5.6 The rapid increase in volume, viciousness, and variety of violent sexual material calls for a response from Christians for the sake of human dignity and respect for all persons. Appropriate available means to address this problem should be considered, including *boycotts* (don't patronize stores which handle offensive, sexually violent materials); *legal action* (where applicable, sue producers and vendors for damages done to person, neighborhood, social climate, reputation); *ordinances* (pass legislation restricting "adult" stores); *protest* (demonstrate nonviolently at government zoning and licensing hearings); *education* (stress the destructive character of portraying sex-connected violence); *coalitions* with other groups (one need not agree on all issues to join together on one issue); *counseling* (both victim and perpetrator need grace and understanding to break the cycle of violence); *promotion of viable alternatives* (be more aggressive about the promotion of the love and acceptance available within Christianity). As a last resort, consider such direct actions as picketing "adult" stores or standing in their doorways with a camera.

5.7 Renewed enthusiasm for communicating the gospel of grace can hold out a beacon of hope for victims of sexual assault and violence who are left with feelings of guilt, fear, shame, and uncleanness. Victims, as well as perpetrators, should be welcomed, forgiven, and affirmed in a new life-style when seeking help from the church.

5.8 Elements in our own religious tradition which are demeaning to people should be recognized and addressed. To the extent that the church has set the climate for, and actively perpetuated, the subordination of women and

children, the burden of guilt must be shared with the perpetrators of commercial, violent, sexual products.

5.9 To the extent that we, as Christians, have declined to keep informed about the growing threat of demeaning and violent sexual material and about the growing numbers of women and children who are directly or indirectly hurt by this industry, we should confess our indifference, naivete, and complicity in its burgeoning presence.

5.10 As Christians, we should be extremely concerned about the explicit anti-Christian element in much of the commercial sex products, insofar as the industry itself identifies symbols, persons, quotations, and rites as Christian and the object of ridicule.

5.11 The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of churches to speak their message of love and peace, also protects the rights of others to communicate potentially violent and slanderous material. Care must be taken to guard the rights of freedom of expression, while at the same time protecting citizens from violation of their rights to respect, integrity, and safety. There needs to be a balance between freedom of expression on one hand, and freedom from oppression on the other hand. To the extent that pornography portrays and incites insults and violence against women, it encroaches upon a woman's right to a safe and peaceable life. To the extent that pornography perceives, shapes and exploits men as primarily interested in voyeurism, violence, and viciousness, men are also its victims. To the extent that pornography portrays children as objects of sexual activity, rather than as powerless dependents needing care and protection, children are its most pathetic victims. And, to the extent that pornography attacks the fabric of our society, our faith, and our respect for one another, we are all its victims.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Victor B. Cline, "Aggression Against Women: The Facilitating Effects of Media Violence and Erotica," an unpublished paper available from Dr. Cline at the University of Utah; Edward Donnerstein and Daniel Linz, "Sexual Violence in the Media: A Warning," *Psychology Today*, January 1984.
2. Diana E. H. Russell, "Pornography and Violence: What Does the New Research Say?," *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1980, p. 219.
3. Paul J. McGeady, "Obscenity Law and the Supreme Court," *Where Do You Draw the Line?*, ed. Victor B. Cline, Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1974, p. 97.
4. Wendy Kaminer, "Pornography and the First Amendment: Prior Restraints and Private Actions," *Take Back the Night*, pp. 241-247.
5. Diana Russell, "Pornography and Violence," *Take Back the Night*, pp. 218-219.
6. Wendy Kaminer, "Pornography and the First Amendment," *Take Back the Night*, pp. 243-244.

7. For a fuller treatment of typical arguments for and against pornography, see John H. Court, *Pornography: A Christian Critique*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980.
8. See, for example, Diana Russell, "Pornography and Violence," *Take Back the Night*, pp. 236-237, for others working in this area.
9. Victor B. Cline, "Where Do You Draw the Line? An Introduction," *Where Do You Draw the Line?*, pp. 7-8.
10. John Court, *Pornography*, pp. 16-17ff.
11. See, for example, John Court, *Pornography*, pp. 18, 20, 23, 25, etc.; Laura Lederer, "'Playboy Isn't Playing,' An Interview with Judith Bat-Ada," *Take Back the Night*, pp. 121-133.
12. Paul C. McCommon, III, CDL Legal counsel, "Pornography, 1983: Its Pervasive Presence in American Society," quoting Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan, "You Can Stop Pornography," *Reader's Digest*, June, 1982.
13. For a discussion of this and other anti-feminine texts, see Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.
14. See also Andrea Dworkin, "For Men, Freedom of Speech; for Women, Silence, Please," *Take Back the Night*, pp. 256-258.

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- Fortune, Marie. *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin*, Pilgrim Press, New York, 1983. About all aspects of sexual violence against women and children, with a section suggesting appropriate pastoral response to those involved. Brief section on definitions and effects of pornography.
- Gallagher, Neil. *The Porno Plague*, Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, 1981. A Christian perspective on pornography, including strategies for combating the presence of explicit materials, sample letters, etc.
- Griffin, Susan. *Pornography and Silence*, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, 1981. A challenging book on the philosophy which the author believes is underlying much of pornography, and other areas of life.
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nography, such as definitions, victims, research, legal issues, strategies, beneficiaries, and effects, from a feminist perspective.

Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984. A study of selected texts from the Old Testament which portray women in a negative light. A responsible book that wants to take seriously the need for churches to hold up positive role models for its members.

2. Pornography

A statement of the Seventh General Convention of The American Lutheran Church adopted October 12, 1974, by action GC74.12.48, as a statement of comment and counsel addressed to the members of the congregations of The American Lutheran Church to aid them in their decisions and actions.

1. Pornography often is equated with obscenity. Pornography indeed may be obscene, but so are other matters not related to sex. Violence, war, double talk intended to deceive, exploiting or treating any other human being as a thing, engaging in manipulative selling, placing material interests ahead of human values—these too are obscene. Christians make a mistake when they leave the impression that it is only sex-oriented obscenities, not the whole range of offenses done to other human beings, which arouse their opposition.

2. Appeals to clamp down on pornography cause problems for Christians. They understand pornography to be material that depicts or describes erotic behavior in ways deliberately intended to stimulate sexual excitement. They regard human sexuality too highly to see it trifled with as a thing for the market place. Thus Christians easily respond to calls for sexual purity and morality in print, on the screen, and on the stage. However, deeper questions are involved in the usual efforts to curb pornography, such as:

- a. is it either right, necessary, or salutary to use civil laws to set standards for thoughts, tastes, and attitudes toward sexual practices?
- b. how can persons and communities be protected against sex-saturated materials and outlets which offend the sensitive or exploit the gullible?
- c. what room is there, with both freedom and responsibility, to explore issues and problems in human sexuality even though they run counter to current taboos and standards?
- d. why is so much of the sexual relegated to the realm of the forbidden and why is it made so difficult for people to appreciate their sexual selves and their sexual feelings?
- e. how does the Gospel liberate the believer from crippling enslavement both to prevailing sexual stereotypes and to self-centered pursuit of erotic pleasures?