

# Why Traditional Sexual Morality No Longer Makes Sense

When it comes to sexual morality, many things that were once considered illicit in the West are no longer so. Divorce and remarriage, contraception, pornography, homosexuality, and various other sex-related activities have become acceptable. Much has changed in just the past one hundred years.

So what happened? It's commonly assumed that dispensing with traditional sexual values has simply been a matter of enlightenment and progress.

Perhaps. But in his classic *After Virtue*, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre gives us reason to believe that dispensing with these values was preceded by dispensing with the context in which the values were intelligible.

In making his point, MacIntyre recounts the discovery of the word "taboo" by Captain Cook (1728-1779), which was used by Polynesians to designate certain prohibited practices. When Cook's seamen asked *why* these practices were prohibited, the Polynesians could not give an answer. Over time, those prohibitions had become separated from their original framework.

MacIntyre explains:

*"Deprive the taboo rules of their original context and they at once are apt to appear as a set of arbitrary prohibitions, as indeed they characteristically do appear when the initial context is lost, when those background beliefs in the light of which the taboo rules had originally been understood have not only been abandoned but forgotten."*

Something like this, I might argue, has happened with sexual morality in the West.

For most of Western history, sexual values were largely determined by the Judeo-Christian tradition, and made sense within that tradition. It provided these values with an intellectual context: a Trinitarian God who is by definition love, sexual intercourse within marriage as imaging that eternal love between the three persons of the godhead, male and female complementarity, etc.

Furthermore, this intellectual context helped shape the social context, meaning that it helped shape a society in which it made sense to reserve sex for marriage, to remain monogamous, to have a large number of children.

But the breakup of religious unity in the West combined with increased secularization undermined the Judeo-Christian intellectual context. Certain values such as freedom and equality were shorn of this context, exalted to a place of primacy, and became the intellectual foundation of the new morality.

Concurrently, (and, perhaps, because of the undermining of the intellectual context) the social context was undermined by the Industrial Revolution and what followed. Living according to traditional sexual values became increasingly difficult, burdensome, and in some cases, pointless. Urban migration meant that children became an economic burden, the intermingling of the sexes in school and work meant that remaining chaste until marriage required a much more heroic effort, and government-provided benefits meant that it was much less necessary for women to stay in undesirable marriages.

Over time, traditional sexual values have simply become less intelligible. They are the fragments of a context that once dominated society, but is now increasingly relegated to its

margins.

Those who applaud the breakdown of traditional sexual morality will hope to maintain society's current intellectual and social contexts, for those contexts give their positions more coherence. On the other hand, those who hope to preserve and reestablish traditional sexual values will need to do more than try to reason with people. They'll also need to recreate a context in which those values actually make sense.

*Image: Pride & Prejudice/BBC*