

# Does Abstinence Make the Heart Grow Fonder?

Bob Sharpe doubts it. A reply to Thomas D'Andrea

"For false witnesses have risen up against me." Ps. 27 v. 12

Contrary to Dr Thomas D'Andrea's criticism of me in 'Marriage and Christian Morals' (*Philosophy Now* Issue 16) I never said, with or without qualification, that Roman Catholics were evil. In fact I can scarcely imagine myself, even in anger, saying something so stupid. The question I raised was whether it is wicked to hold or propagate evil doctrines and I made some fairly careful distinctions. But even if a Roman Catholic does hold or advocate an evil doctrine, it does not follow that she is an evil woman. We have all said or done bad things. Many of us hold beliefs which are evil. That does not make us evil as Stalin, Hitler or Henry VIII were evil. Human character is more complex than that.

D'Andrea ignores the main point of my article – that a proper understanding of sexuality sees it as intrinsic to many good marriages. It makes abstinence something which damages the marriage bond. He thinks it can improve it. Well, millions of couples know that sometimes love-making is the only way to restore a relationship which has been damaged by a misunderstanding or friction and that cannot wait until the next 'safe period'. This is one of the 'moral facts' about being a human sexual being, a being for whom love is important. (It is comparable with the 'moral fact' that the talented and the stupid, the compassionate and the cruel are to be found in all races). I explicitly said that the Churches see something positive in sexuality and I didn't deny that the Church understands that marriage imposes obligations and demands in taking responsibility for another. What I said was that it was hard for celibates to see marriage as a vale of soul making – but I did not say it was impossible. It is a fact that the Roman Church has always regarded virginity and celibacy as the best state to be in. Marriage is an honourable estate, yes – for those who are incapable of something higher. This is clear in St. Paul's words in 1 Cor. 7, which D'Andrea cites. The other passages from the New Testament epistles do not specifically address the issue of marriage as a vale of soul-making. They are largely about the inferior status of women in marriage and are irrelevant to the point at issue.

The centre of Dr D'Andrea's reply is a description of Church teaching on divine design etc. There are many, many accounts of what God requires. Not one of their advocates offer any decent reasons why we should think that they are true and it would be unfair to expect Dr D'Andrea to succeed where nobody else has. But if every effort to thwart conception is usurping the role of God, then this ought to apply to an intentional use of the 'safe' period. And if the argument is that the safe period allows God to intervene if He wishes, then the presumption appears to be that He is incapable of puncturing a condom if he wishes. This is all silly stuff. More to the point, can anyone who sits down and thinks about this matter without having an authoritarian Church breathing down his neck, possibly imagine that God, confronted with a world in which Protestants murder Catholics in Ulster, Serbs murder Muslims in Bosnia and so on, cares about whether people use the rhythm method rather than the pill? If He does, I can only conclude that the Lord has lost all sense of proportion.

Any interest here is in the pathology of the reply, not in it as a rational counter to what I have said. Why is D'Andrea so angry? Why does he keep saying that I am ignorant and ill-informed? Why does he set up a straw man?

I attack a feature of Christian ethics. This is tough for a believer to accept, tougher than if I had simply denied God's existence because for Christians, morality and faith are deeply intertwined. More significantly perhaps, conservative Roman Catholics believe that their faith is rational in that only a deliberate closing of the eyes to the clear light of reason prevents me or anybody else from seeing that what they claim is true. Perhaps Dr D'Andrea thinks that a clear statement of church doctrine is all that is required. All that I can say is most of what he says about it is very familiar to me. I am not ignorant of the teachings of the church. I just don't believe them.

When I talked about this to student audiences here and elsewhere it rather fell flat. Catholic students and staff replied that nobody believes all this silly business about contraception anyway and when the present Pope goes, with him will go, with any luck, this nonsense about celibacy and contraception. What this says for the consistency of their view I do not know, but I had at least an admiration for their commonsense and humanity. But it does not neutralise the genuine anger we ought to feel at the unnecessary suffering the Churches have caused by the Manichaeism and sexism so endemic in their teaching. What I wanted to do, above all, is to scotch the commonplace assumption that religion is a moral force, that the Churches, whatever their faults, at least do not get morality wrong. Sexuality is an area in which they get things so seriously wrong that their teaching is frequently wicked.<sup>1</sup>

Reading Dr D'Andrea's reply was a deeply depressing experience, not because his fury at a challenge to his beliefs caused him to distort what I said. He consistently missed the nuances which I was careful to put in, but that is not so important. It is the downside of fierce conviction. In this way, as any thoughtful person will recognise, religion is a force for evil as well as good. What is distressing is that, faced with the complexity and individuality of human sexual relationships which require above all imaginative understanding, all he can offer is prescriptions. There is a failure of imagination and a failure of wisdom at the heart of what many of the churches teach here.

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1. Other readers might be interested in my book *The Moral Case Against Religious Belief* (Forthcoming, SCM Press)

## See also

'Marriage: How the Churches Corrupt' RA Sharpe, *Philosophy Now* Issue 13

'Marriage and Christian Morals: How Uninformed Philosophical Speculation Corrupts' T D'Andrea *Philosophy Now* Issue 16

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