

## From Masturbation to Homosexuality: A Case of Displaced Moral Disapproval

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*I argue that the decline in moral disapproval of masturbation in the American religious culture over the last half-century is directly responsible for increased moral disapproval of homosexuality. Moral disapproval previously directed toward masturbators is being redirected instead toward homosexuals. Since masturbation has been practiced by the overwhelming majority of individuals who self-identify with the American religious culture, while homosexual acts have been engaged in by a significantly smaller number of individuals who self-identify with this culture, the displacement of moral disapproval from masturbatory behavior to homosexual behavior leads to the stigmatization of those who engage in homosexual behavior, and an attitude of moral superiority and personal condescension inevitably follows. Nineteenth and twentieth century writings on the perils and evils of masturbation are cited in support of this argument.*

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Those who engage in homosexual acts are now being singled out, especially in the religious culture, as moral reprobates, whereas in the 19th century and early decades of the 20th century, they shared this dubious honor with those who engaged in self-masturbatory practices. Masturbation no longer receives the attention that it formerly received, having virtually fallen off the moral opprobrium radar screen. As a result, those who engage in homosexual acts bear a greater burden as the object of moral disapproval than before, and homosexual behavior receives much greater scrutiny, is the subject of much more moral and theological debate, and is the target of considerably greater moral condemnation than previously. Immanuel Kant (1963), the 19th century German philosopher, identified masturbation, homosexual acts, and sodomy (sexual acts with other species) as the three major sexual “crimes”

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against our “animal nature” (p. 169). If masturbation is no longer subject to moral disapproval, and sodomy is a relatively rare occurrence, this leaves homosexual acts as the unrivaled focus of sexual moral condemnation, at least as far as these three “crimes” are concerned.

In *Whatever Became of Sin* (1977), Karl Menninger, perhaps the most influential psychiatrist of the mid-20th century, notes that masturbation, long considered the “great sin of youth,” is barely mentioned, much less discussed, today. Prior to the late 20th Century, however, “Almost no other activity was so regularly condemned and punished as erotic self-stimulation, autoeroticism. For centuries, school children, prisoners, sailors, and slaves were savagely punished when detected in or even suspected of ‘the solitary vice’ of ‘self-abuse’” (p. 31).

Menninger cites a study by E. H. Hare, “Masturbatory Insanity: The History of an Idea,” published in the *Journal of Mental Science* in 1962, that shows both the degree and intensity of moral condemnation directed toward masturbation and those who practiced it. For example, Hare quotes T. Pouillet, writing in 1876: “Of all the vices and of all the misdeeds which may properly be called crimes against nature which devour humanity, menace its physical vitality and tend to destroy its intellectual and moral faculties, one of the greatest and most widespread—no one will deny it—is masturbation” (p. 31).

Menninger notes that, while the moral taboo against masturbation is thousands of years old, and attempts at deterrence by punishment have gone on for centuries, a strong “intimidation curb” from the medical profession began about 250 years ago. A famous book by an unknown author (Menninger suggests that he was a “quack” doctor), bearing the title, *Onania, or The Heinous Sin of Self-Pollution*, published in 1716, went through 80 editions. Forty years later a renowned and universally respected Swiss physician, Samuel Tissot, took up the same theme in a book that claimed a direct causal relationship between masturbation and various physical diseases and mental disorders. Titled *Onania, or a Treatise upon the Disorders Produced by Masturbation*, it had a profound effect on medical thought, resulting in numerous medical articles on masturbation. According to Hare, “By the end of the eighteenth century the masturbatory hypothesis for much disease was widely accepted throughout Europe and America” (p. 31).

### **Immanuel Kant on Crimes Against Our Animal Nature**

Medical doctors, however, were not the only official opponents of masturbation. Hare notes that major philosophical thinkers, like Voltaire and Rousseau, who were otherwise known for their liberality, wrote condemnations of masturbation designed to cower any skeptic as to the evil nature of the practice. But the influential German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, in *Lectures on Ethics* (1963), formulated an especially systematic rationale for why masturbation is morally indefensible. In a section of these lectures on “Duties Towards the Body in Respect of Sexual

Impulse,” he discusses what he calls *crimina carnis* (or crimes against the body), and defines them as acts that are “contrary to self-regarding duty because they are against the ends of humanity” and “consist in abuse of one’s sexuality” (p. 169). He distinguishes two forms of *crimina carnis*. One is *crimina carnis contra secundum naturam*, or acts that are contrary to sound reason. The second is *crimina carnes contra naturam*, or acts contrary to our animal nature. The former include concubinage, incest, and suicide. The latter include onanism (or masturbation), homosexuality, and sodomy (sexual acts committed with other species).

He describes onanism as “the abuse of the sexual faculty without any object, the exercise of the faculty in the complete absence of any object of sexuality,” and says that this “practice is contrary to the ends of humanity and even opposed to animal nature. By it man sets aside his person and degrades himself below the level of animals” (p. 170). Homosexuality is “intercourse between *sexus homogenii*, in which the object of sexual impulse is a human being but there is homogeneity instead of heterogeneity of sex, as when a woman satisfies her desire on a woman, or a man on a man.” He asserts that this “practice too is contrary to the ends of humanity; for the end of humanity in respect of sexuality is to preserve the species without debasing the person; but in this instance the species is not preserved (as it can be a *crimen carnes secundum naturam*) but the person is set aside, the self degraded below the level of the animals, and humanity is dishonored” (p. 170). The third, sodomy, “occurs when the object of desire is in fact of the opposite sex but is not human. . . . This, too, is contrary to the ends of humanity and against our natural instinct. It degrades mankind below the level of animals, for no animal turns in this way from its own species” (p. 170).

Kant concludes that the second form of *crimen carnis*, or acts contrary to our animal nature, are worse than the first form, acts against our second nature, because these acts “degrade human nature to a level below that of animal nature and make man unworthy of his humanity. He no longer deserves to be a person” (p. 170). He acknowledges that suicide, one of the four *crimina carnis secundum naturam*, is the “most dreadful” of all *crimen carnis*, but it is not as “dishonorable and base” as *crimen carnis contra naturam*. The latter, in fact, are “so abominable” that “they are unmentionable, for the very mention of them is nauseating, as is not the case with suicide” (p. 170).

This presents teachers with a dilemma. Should they mention these acts, so as “to warn their charges against them”? Or should they refrain from mentioning them “in order that people should not learn of them and so not have the opportunity of transgressing? Frequent mention would familiarize people with them and the vices might as a result cease to disgust us and come to appear more tolerable” (p. 171). He advises teachers to “mention them only circumspectly and with disinclination” so that “our aversion from them is still apparent” (p. 171). An especially important reason for exercising restraint in mentioning them is that “Each sex is ashamed of the vices of which its members are capable. Human beings feel, therefore, ashamed

to mention those things of which it is shameful for humanity to be capable. These vices make us ashamed that we are human beings, and, therefore, capable of them, for an animal is incapable of all such *crimina carnis contra naturam*" (p. 171). How shaming it is to realize that humans are capable of unspeakable acts in which other animals, whom we deem to be inferior to us, do not themselves indulge!

Two things are especially noteworthy about Kant's discussion of crimes against the body. One is his view that masturbation, homosexual acts, and sodomy are inherently worse than concubinage, adultery, incest, and suicide, as they are acts that "degrade" those who engage in them "below the level of animals" (p. 170). Why are these acts more degrading (e.g., why are masturbation and homosexual acts worse than incest)? Because the purpose of sexuality "is to preserve the species," and, therefore, although the crimes against our "second nature" (sound reason) are "contrary to our self-regarding duty," they are not contrary to "the ends of humanity," which, as far as sexuality is concerned, are to preserve the human species (p. 170). Our disgust with acts against our animal nature is an effective deterrent, but the basic reason why these acts are "degrading" is that there is no intention to preserve the species. Thus, Kant places an extremely heavy burden on species preservation as the basis for making moral judgments regarding the behaviors with which he is concerned.

Another noteworthy feature of his discussion is that he identifies three crimes against man's animal nature: onanism, or self-abuse; homosexual acts; and sodomy, or sexual acts with other species. His identification of these crimes against man's animal nature (and only these) raises the question of what happens when one of these three crimes (masturbation) comes to be viewed in the latter half of the 20th century less as a serious moral crime and more, at most, as a moral misdemeanor? The answer, in my view, is that it makes practitioners of the other two crimes more vulnerable to moral opprobrium, social stigmatization, and personal abuse. Since sodomy with animals would appear to be a relatively rare behavior, whereas homosexuality is far more prevalent, we should expect that the moral disapproval previously expended on masturbation would be redirected toward those engaged in homosexual acts. Homosexuality would then be viewed as a singular example of what Kant considers to be the worst form of crimes against the body (worse than concubinage, adultery, incest, and suicide). The contentiousness that has prevailed in recent decades in the American religious culture over homosexual behavior, a contentiousness far more prevalent and sustained than in the case, say, of adultery and incest, indicates that many religiously identified persons share Kant's view that homosexuality is the worst crime against the body.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY VIEWS ON MASTURBATION

If masturbation is no longer held to be the heinous crime against the body it was once held to be, the obvious question is why and how this happened? Why

did moral disapproval of masturbation decline? There are various reasons for this decline, and an attempt to identify all or even most of them would require a much more extensive investigation into the history of masturbation than is possible here. However, one important reason for this decline is that, in the first decades of the 20th Century, psychiatrists and other doctors began to challenge the view that masturbation causes physical disease, mental disorders and moral degeneracy. A minority view at first, this challenge gained support through the 1930s and 40s. By mid-century the view that masturbation causes physical disease, mental disorders and moral degeneracy was thoroughly discredited. By now, the fact that virtually the whole medical community in the 19th century assumed that masturbation had these effects is almost beyond belief.

Hare cites several 19th Century authors who made a direct association between masturbation and mental disorders. R. H. Allnott reported in 1843 that when one of his patients “entered the room with a timid and suspicious air and appeared to quail like an irresolute maniac when the eye was fixed steadily on him,” there was no doubt of the cause of the patient’s problems (p. 32). When Allnott “directly charged” the patient with masturbatory behavior, he would usually admit it.

Another author, C. F. Lallemand, also cited by Hare, emphasized the cold and callous qualities of the masturbator: “He has no other interests; he loves no one; he is attracted to no one; he shares no emotion before the grandeur of nature or the beauties of art; still less is he capable of any generous impulse or act of loyalty; he is dead to the call of his family, his country, or of humanity” (p. 32). In an essay on “onanism in females,” T. Pouillet, cited earlier, held that there is no single sign of masturbation in girls, but that a number of them, taken together, “create a strong, even an almost certain, presumption of this vice, in spite of denials” (p. 33). These signs included an unsteady and peevish disposition tending toward anger, an exaggerated timidity in the presence of parents and a surly attitude toward strangers, a profound idleness, and a tendency toward lying.

### The Case of William James

While these authors emphasized the role of masturbation in the creation of a morally weak, even degenerate, character, others emphasized its role in mental disease. Beginning in the early decades of the 19th century, masturbation was deemed a major cause of mania, melancholy, and dementia. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1982; originally published in 1902), William James includes an account of his experience in his late 20s of “the worst form of melancholy,” that of “panic fear.” In his case, this was a sudden attack of “horrible fear of my own existence” (p. 160). Simultaneously, there arose in his mind “the image of an epileptic patient I had seen in the asylum, a black-haired youth with greenish skin, entirely idiotic, who used to sit all day on one of the benches, or rather shelves against the wall, with his knees drawn up against his chin, and the coarse gray

undershirt, which was his only garment, drawn over them enclosing his entire figure. He sat there like a sort of sculptured Egyptian cat or Peruvian mummy, moving nothing but his black eyes and looking absolutely nonhuman” (p. 160). At that moment, James felt his image of the youth and his own panic fear coalescing, and realized, to his utter horror, that the “shape” he had seen in his mind was potentially himself: “There was such a horror of him, and such a perception of my own merely momentary discrepancy from him, that it was as if something hitherto solid within my breast gave way entirely, and I became a mass of quivering fear” (p. 160). The fear was “so invasive and powerful” that had he not “clung to scripture-texts like ‘The eternal God is my refuge,’ etc., ‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden,’ etc., ‘I am the resurrection and the life,’ etc., I think I should have grown really insane” (p. 161).

In her biography of James (1998), Linda Simon suggests that the “mental patient James recalled was notable because he suffered not from the common pathology of moral insanity (alcoholism and excessive masturbation, for example) but from epilepsy, which, although often misdiagnosed and misunderstood, could not be cured by strengthening a patient’s will. An epileptic patient was at the mercy of his own biology” (p. 125). This would seem to suggest that James did not associate his own crisis with his struggle, perhaps unsuccessful, to, as Lewis puts it, “hold in check certain bad habits, tendencies to ‘moral degradation’ (another allusion, probably, to auto-eroticism)” (p. 201). However, in *Manhood at Harvard* (1996), Kim Townsend contends that James himself believed that masturbation was the cause of the young mental patient’s madness. He notes:

When a man fears or experiences the dissolution of his financial and professional and public life, it would not be surprising if his private or intimate or sexual life seemed to lack all purpose or definition as well. How specifically James was applying the diagnosis to himself we cannot say, but into his darkest imaginings there seems to have come the figure—perhaps the very figure a nineteenth-century medical student [like James himself] might have in mind—of a man driven insane by masturbation (p. 52).

Townsend cites a text, Jean Etienne Dominique Esquirol’s monumental and standard treatise on mental illness, published in 1838, which may well have explicitly informed James’ vision of madness. It contains “an illustration of an idiot, in a coarse undershirt, his hair black, his eyes wild, and ‘his knees drawn against his chin’” (p. 53). This illustrative image “is of one Aba, a man who has no memory, who can do nothing other than feed himself, and whose only utterances are the sounds ‘ba ba ba’—all the result of his being ‘a masturbator,’ Esquirol says” (p. 53).

Townsend notes, however, that “James would not have needed Esquirol’s text. If the image haunting him sprang out of his visits to the state insane asylums in Northampton or Worcester, it might well have been an image of a masturbator, for according to an influential report on idiocy presented to the Massachusetts state legislature by the superintendent at Worcester, 32% of the population was there because of ‘self-pollution’” (p. 53). Townsend guesses that the authors of

the report were “so dismayed by seeing madmen masturbate” that “they assumed their self-indulgence had driven them mad” (p. 53). Townsend also cites a 1968 article by Cushing Strout, who speculates that as a medical student James would probably have been familiar with William Acton’s *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* and would have been struck by Acton’s warnings that the habit of introspection could lead not just to “the suicidal view of life” but to masturbation and madness as well (p. 53). In his diary from this period, James notes that he has been reading Henry Maudsley, the British psychiatrist, who was also an “authority” on “the relationship between masturbation and the morbid brooding of those who are unable to chart a straight course through life” (p. 53).

Townsend acknowledges that it may seem far-fetched to attribute James’ experience of “quivering fear” to his unsuccessful struggle to curb his masturbatory habits, but he notes that “when [James] was a boy he was told about the dire consequences of ‘that horrible pollution’ by his own father—and when the appropriate time came, he duly passed on his father’s warnings to one of his sons. ‘If any boys try to make you *do* anything dirty,’ he told him when he went off to boarding school, ‘either to your own person, or to their persons . . . you must both preach and smite them. For that leads to an awful habit, and a terrible disease when one is older’” (pp. 53–54).

Noting that James determined to do something about his habit of “self-abuse” by setting out on a course of “moral hygiene,” Wendy Graham (1999) points out that he was therefore very much in tune with the moral leaders of his time:

William’s reflections on moral hygiene should be read in light of nineteenth-century descriptions of sexual neurasthenia and masturbatory insanity. Samuel Tissot’s 1758 text on onanism inaugurated a booming market for publications of this kind. William Acton’s *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* was widely available after its publication in 1857, and his ideas were rapidly disseminated by boarding school administrators, priests, and doctors, as Ed Cohen explains: “As the topic of frequent sermons, lectures, advice sessions, and disciplinary actions, masturbation became a primary focus for the enactment of pedagogical authority over middle-class adolescent boys” (p. 41).

Graham cites a 1973 article by Charles Rosenberg on sexuality, class, and role in 19th century America that shows that from the 1830s on, “self-control, the need to repress childhood and adolescent sexuality, became issues of paramount importance in America” (p. 43). Another article, by Peter Cominos, “argues that Victorian men were socialized to conform to a program of ‘strict and extreme continence’ and ‘exaggerated asceticism’” (p. 43). Specifically, “Masturbation was decried as the cause of impotence, sexual neurasthenia, immorality, madness, and failure in professional and business pursuits” (pp. 43–44). She also cites G. J. Barker-Benfield’s “The Spermatic Economy and Proto-Sublimation,” which summarizes the content of Victorian advice-books such as *The Student’s Manual*, which “warned against the enervating effects of masturbation owing to the loss of vital fluids,” and “recommended tonics, stimulants, exercise, and cold showers as methods for controlling the base impulse to self abuse” (p. 44).

Graham's discussion of masturbation occurs within a larger consideration of William James' brother Henry's struggle with his homosexual desires. She notes that William, owing to his medical training and his position as an instructor in physiology and psychology at Harvard, served throughout his life as Henry's informal consulting physician. In that capacity, he must have advised his brother to control his homosexual desires, and for essentially the same reasons that he sought to control his own masturbatory urges. In any case, "Henry's fears of psychological, physical, and moral disintegration carried greater weight" in "his renunciation of physical passion" than did "codes of respectable behavior" (p. 44).

### **Medical Treatment of Masturbation**

The medical journals of the late 19th century were replete with articles describing surgical and other procedures designed to eradicate masturbation. Writing in *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1883, Dr. Timothy Haynes described a surgical procedure that he had developed for curing "hopeless cases of masturbation and nocturnal emissions." Indicating that he has frequently been called upon to care for victims of self-abuse, his normal procedure is to help the "perverted" state of mind of the victims by counseling marriage and even, at times, the immorality of a mistress. But some cases are so utterly desperate, the individual so destroyed mentally and physically, that he began to wonder whether some help could be provided even at the expense of the procreative powers. Judging the scar of castration to be an intolerable stigma, he developed a less extreme surgical procedure, which involved removing parts of the spermatic duct. He would make an incision midway between the external inguinal ring and the testis. This incision provided access to the duct, from which a half inch was cut off, and the "slight" wound was then closed with a suture.

Haynes cites three cases in which positive results were achieved. An eighteen year old confirmed masturbator who had spent nearly a year in the New Hampshire Asylum for the Insane did not experience full recovery from his demented state, but he was so far relieved by the treatment that he became a very useful farm hand. A thirty-six year old, addicted to masturbation and suffering from nocturnal emissions for several years, was of such disordered mind that he was totally unfit for any business. Symptomatic of his deranged mind was the fact that when he embarked on a journey he was more than likely to turn up miles from the place he intended to reach. After the surgery, he began to improve in physical strength and appearance, and is now a correct, healthy business man. His testicles are normal in size and appearance, but the sexual desire is entirely destroyed. The third man, aged thirty, had practiced self-abuse for years and also suffered from nocturnal emissions. He was such a physical wreck that he was unable even to walk without assistance. He was very emaciated and had been confined to his room for months. While not insane, his mind was impaired, and at times it was difficult to get him to



take sufficient food. After the surgical procedure, he gained weight and improved markedly in physical strength. Haynes thus commends this procedure as having the same desired results as castration without the genital deformity. Of course, the price of these men's improvement in mental and physical condition was the permanent eradication of any sexual appetite.

In *The Therapeutic State* (1984), Thomas Szasz discusses an article published in the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* in 1879 in which the author, Dr. B. A. Pope, describes the case of a fourteen year old boy whose "syndrome" was allegedly caused by masturbation. The patient's presenting problem was the loss of sight, together with anemia and mental weakness. Judging that his blindness had a "cerebral" or mental cause, as the retina and optic papillae appeared healthy, Pope proceeded to ask the boy about his masturbatory habits. He extracted a "confession," though with "great difficulty," and got the patient to promise to discontinue the habit. Thereupon, he injected morphine into his arm, and a month later the boy was dismissed from treatment, the very "picture of health," his sight restored and "every type of anemia and mental imbecility" eradicated (pp. 348–349).

Szasz contends that the case history presented by Dr. Pope is nothing but a "caricature" of medical diagnosis: "The patient is a pubertal boy brought to the doctor by his father. Presumably, the father has been warned throughout his life that self-abuse causes weakness, blindness, and madness, and he has duly transmitted this warning to his son. The boy reaches puberty—and, presto, he presents a textbook case of masturbatory insanity" (p. 349). In Szasz' view, Dr. Pope's "diagnosis" of the fourteen-year-old boy is not science—he establishes no causal connection between the boy's masturbatory habits and his symptoms. Instead, it is pure rhetoric. What belief in the pathogenic powers of masturbation rested upon was the absence of a clear distinction between distress and disease.

### **Masturbation: Convenient Scapegoat**

Because Szasz' main concern in *The Therapeutic State* was to challenge contemporary arguments that masturbation is therapeutic (for him, the medical profession has no more basis for claiming its therapeutic value now than it previously had in claiming its pathogenic powers), he did not develop his critique of the earlier pathogenic view in detail. However, in a recent article, "Remembering Masturbatory Insanity" (2000), he returns to the subject, noting that, from the very beginning of scientific medicine, masturbation (or "self-abuse") was a handy scapegoat when medical practitioners could not identify the cause of a particular disease: "By the end of the 1700s, it was medical dogma that masturbation causes blindness, epilepsy, gonorrhea, tabes dorsalis, priapism, constipation, conjunctivitis, acne, painful menstruation, nymphomania, impotence, consumption, anemia, and of course insanity, melancholia, and suicide" (p. 2). Among the widely accepted treatments of masturbation, the most important were restraining devices

and mechanical appliances, circumcision, cauterizing of the genitals, clitoridectomy, and castration. He notes that as recently as 1936, a widely used pediatric textbook recommended some of these methods. The primary “beneficiaries” of these treatments were children and the insane, who were then, as now, the ideal patients because they were powerless against their relatives and doctors, unable to resist “being fitted with grotesque appliances, encased in plaster of Paris, having their genitalia cauterized or de-nerved, or being castrated—for their own good” (p. 2).

In a concluding section of his paper bearing the heading, “Error or Arrogance?” Szasz suggests that this scapegoating of masturbation provides a valuable warning against similar abuses of power today. Noting that young males have always experienced and displayed nocturnal emissions, the manifestations of normal pubertal male genital physiology, what was it that turned these emissions into dreaded “symptoms” of dangerous “spermatorrhea”? The same thing that in our own day has turned youthful male exuberance into the dreaded symptoms of dangerous attention deficit disorder, namely, “parental annoyance and anxiety combined with medical imperialism and furur therapeuticus” (p. 3). In Szasz’ view, these are not innocent medical errors. Instead, the belief in masturbatory insanity and its treatment “enhanced the identity and self-concept of the believers. Ostensibly, such beliefs assert facts; actually, they credential believers” (p. 4). Thus, “none of psychiatry’s classic mistakes—from masturbatory insanity and its cures, to the disease of homosexuality and its compulsory treatment with ‘aversion therapy,’ and to the attention of the cause of schizophrenia to reverberating circuits in the frontal lobes and its cure with lobotomy—are innocent errors” (pg. 4). Rather, these are instances of arrogance, the abuse of power, as “the false belief and the medical interventions it appears to justify serves the needs of the believers, especially the relatives of ‘patients’ who seek control over the misbehavior of their ‘loved ones,’ and the physicians who gain prestige and power by ‘diagnosing’ and ‘treating’ misbehavior as if it were disease” (p. 3).

## TWENTIETH CENTURY VIEWS ON MASTURBATION

As indicated, Szasz points out that as recently as 1936 a widely used pediatric textbook advocated some of the medical treatments described above for masturbation. He also notes that “as recently as 1938,” Karl Menninger, “the undisputed dean of American psychiatry in mid-century—declared: ‘In the unconscious mind, it [masturbation] always represents an aggression against someone’” (p. 3). In effect, a psychodynamic understanding had replaced the 19th century view that masturbation is the cause of mental insanity, but it was still being viewed as a form of psychopathology, one that invited psychotherapeutic treatment in cases where the habit persisted. As Menninger notes, Freud considered masturbation “the primary addiction,” and suggested that other addictions (alcohol, tobacco, morphine,

etc.) are a substitute for and means of withdrawal from masturbation (p. 34). His physician-biographer, Max Shur, noted that Freud viewed his compulsive addiction to smoking, which he could not relinquish in spite of near-cancerous lesions in his mouth for which he submitted to many painful operations the last 14 years of his life, as a substitute for the primary addiction of masturbation (p. 34).

### **Masturbation as Immoral and Sinful Behavior**

Most important for our purposes here, however, is the fact that, as the view of masturbation as the cause of various physical diseases and mental disorders was being abandoned in the first several decades of the 20th century, the view that it is immoral—a vice or sin—showed little sign of abating. Freud is instructive in this regard. As Szasz shows, Freud did not view masturbation as a cause of mental insanity, but he did contend that neurasthenia (a condition whose symptoms include lack of motivation, feelings of inadequacy, and psychosomatic symptoms) may be traced back to a condition of the nervous system caused by excessive masturbation or frequent emissions (1984, p. 349). Freud also considered masturbation “perverse” because “it has given up the aim of reproduction and pursues the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it” (p. 349). Thus, masturbation is problematic on moral grounds because it departs from conventional, genital, heterosexual intercourse aimed at procreation. Menninger notes that when one of Freud’s own sons came to him with worries about masturbation, he issued a strong parental warning against engaging in the practice, and this, according to another of Freud’s sons, led to an estranged relationship between them (p. 34). Szasz notes the absurdity of Gay Talese’s use of the term “this Freudian age” in a book published in 1980 that promoted “a therapeutic ideology of sexual salvation through masturbation” (1984, p. 336).

Menninger’s account of his father’s advice to young boys is also instructive. Menninger notes that “in the high schools of this country until well after the turn of the century it was widely customary to have ‘sex talks,’ made by the local doctors once a year, given to the boys and girls separately. The themes were usually the dangers of pregnancy, venereal disease, and masturbation” (p. 34). He says that he has “always been rather proud of the fact that my own father, when doing his turn at this civic chore about 1906, told the boys that while not to be recommended (this would have been scandalous!) masturbation was not as harmful as some books and speakers described and was nothing to worry about. For this audacious affront to the popular and professional code he was much censured” (pp. 34–35). The very fact that Menninger’s father was greatly censured even though he told the boys that masturbation was “not to be recommended” and “was not as harmful” as commonly asserted—hardly a radical position—suggests that even the most “enlightened” doctors were unwilling to declare that there is nothing wrong with masturbation or that it is a morally neutral behavior.

Menninger notes that Havelock Ellis, author of a multivolume text on the psychology of sex and cited by Freud in his lectures at Clark University in 1909 as having coined the term “autoeroticism” (Rosenzweig, 1994, p. 428), complained in 1901 that Tissot’s book on the disorders produced by masturbation had “raised masturbation to the position of a colossal bogey, and accused Tissot of combining his reputation as a physician with religious fanaticism” (Menninger, p. 33). To Ellis, it was clear that a major force behind the pathologizing of masturbation was the religious culture of the time. Thus, while the association of masturbation with various physical diseases and mental disorders declined in the first several decades of the 20th century, its association with immorality and sinfulness did not.

Citing his own experience of growing up in America at the turn of the century, Menninger notes that “in America the masturbation taboo has always been, until recently, very explicit.” It was never a crime, but it was considered a moral offense of such seriousness that many authorities joined hands in insuring its prohibition: “To help stem the temptation of evil-doing, threats or inflictions of dire punishment were commonly made to children by all and sundry” (p. 34). Parents looked for the slightest evidence of the sin, and school teachers were on the alert for it: “To an extent difficult for the present-day reader to grasp,” masturbation was “the *major sin* for middle- and upper-class adolescents a century and less ago” (p. 35). Because it was secretly indulged in by the vast majority of adolescents, it was “an ever-present, easily reached source of guilt feelings, often exploited by religious leaders. Consider the emotional conflict in a boy (or girl), instructed in the faith, that Jesus, the good man, the Son of God, died ‘for your sins,’ whose chief preoccupation was his propensity for repeating this dreadful act” (p. 35).

What made it especially dreadful was the fear that one would be found out (either because one was directly observed engaging in masturbation or because one’s body began to manifest one or more of its telltale signs). And, of course, religious leaders emphasized that God knows our “secret sins,” that nothing can be hidden from the omniscient, all-knowing Father. Menninger notes that he once witnessed “a large room full of university men bowed on their knees in prayer for forgiveness and for strength to resist the temptation of (this) sin” (p. 35).

### **Masturbation as Sin: Disappearance or Displacement?**

But, then, Menninger claims, an “amazing circumstance” occurred “some-time soon after the turn of the present [i.e., 20th] century.” This ancient taboo, “for the violation of which millions had been punished, threatened, condemned, intimidated, and made hypocritical and cynical—a taboo thousands of years old—vanished almost overnight! Masturbation, the solitary vice, the SIN of youth, suddenly seemed not to be so sinful, perhaps not sinful at all; not so dangerous—in fact, not dangerous at all; less a vice than a form of pleasurable experience, and a

normal and healthy one!” (p. 36). Menninger views this “sudden metamorphosis in an almost universal social attitude” toward masturbation as “more significant of the changed temper, philosophy, and morality of the twentieth century than any other phenomenon that comes to mind” (p. 36). When the view that masturbation is a sin “disappeared,” it seems that all sin other than crime disappeared along with it: “This, in a way, now seems regrettable. For masturbation lost its quality of sinfulness through a new understanding, but there was no new understanding of ruthlessness or wastefulness or cruelty” (p. 36). To be sure, “a small amount of the disapproval of masturbation may have been displaced by previously undervalued ‘sins’ such as those mentioned, but, in general, it seems as if the great phenomenon of a deadly sin suddenly disappearing—and disappearing ‘without anyone noticing it’—affected our attitude toward other disapproved behavior” (pg. 36).

Two points need to be made regarding the contention that the view of masturbation as sinful suddenly disappeared soon after the turn of the 20th century. First, Szasz’s account of attitudes toward masturbation in the 20th century presents a very different and, in my judgment, far more accurate picture. In his reconstruction, there was a fundamental change in social attitudes toward masturbation, but it occurred during and after the sexual revolution of the 1960s. He views William Masters and Virginia Johnson’s *Human Sexual Response*, published in 1966, and their subsequent book, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, published four years later, as especially influential in this regard. If Samuel Tissot’s book on onanism played a major role in shaping 19th century attitudes toward masturbation, these books by Masters and Johnson had a similar influence in the latter decades of the 20th century. While Freud had contended that the aim of sexual activity is reproduction, and that a sexual activity is perverse if it “pursues the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it,” Masters and Johnson “maintain the opposite view—namely, that the aim of human sexuality should be the procuring of pleasure” (p. 338). Thus, masturbation is not only acceptable, it is also highly recommended (e.g., for release of tension), and the problem that may require treatment is not engagement in masturbation but the failure to experience pleasure through masturbation.

Of course, there were members of the therapeutic community—Szasz included—who did not endorse this new understanding of masturbation. Szasz’s opposition was based on his contention that, even as psychiatrists had no business endorsing the view that masturbation is immoral, neither do they have any warrant—scientific or otherwise—for endorsing the idea that it is a healthy activity. Many religious leaders also opposed it. However, Szasz quotes the following declaration by the evangelist, Ruth Carter Stapleton, sister of former President Carter, in the *Atlanta Journal* in the early 1980s: “The Lord wants us to experience whole, complete lives, and He offers this gift (masturbation) to each of us as we surrender to Him” (p. 346). A clearer indication of how the moral and theological landscape had changed is difficult to imagine. It did not, however, happen overnight—as Menninger claims—and it did not occur shortly after

the turn of the 20th Century. If there were indications of changing attitudes at that time, the “almost universal” change to which Menninger refers took another sixty years.

Second, Menninger indicates that, for the most part, masturbation as an immoral or sinful behavior simply disappeared, that is, there was little displacement of the moral disapproval of masturbation onto other behaviors that are, in his view, clearly sinful. Rather, the disappearance of masturbation as a sin reflects the “changed temper, philosophy, and morality of the twentieth century” (p. 36). I would agree that moral disapproval of masturbation was not displaced onto ruthlessness, wastefulness or cruelty. However, in my view, such a displacement did occur in the last several decades of the 20th century, a displacement of moral disapproval of masturbation onto homosexual behavior. As moral disapproval of masturbation has declined, moral disapproval of homosexual behavior has actually increased. Moral disapproval does not simply “disappear.” Rather, it gets displaced. It is as though there is a constant amount of moral disapproval in American society, and if it ceases to be directed toward one behavior and its practitioners, it shifts to another behavior and *its* practitioners.

### THE DISPLACEMENT OF MORAL DISAPPROVAL

The argument that the moral energy directed against masturbation was displaced onto a new object of moral disapproval, homosexuality, makes sense at a purely theoretical level, as the psychoanalytic theory of displacement refers to the redirection of an emotion or impulse from its original object (e.g., a person or idea) to another. It also assumes that this is an unconscious process, that the person (or, in this case, the religious culture) that engages in this displacement is largely unaware of the fact that it has done so. It knows, of course, what and who are its current targets of moral disapproval. But the original target of its moral disapproval is a distant memory. On the other hand, the two objects need to have something in common—while being sufficiently distinctive—for the displacement to do its work. Since, as we have seen, masturbation and homosexual behavior *do* have something in common that is deemed very important by those who engage in moral disapproval of both (i.e., the fact that both are sexual activities that do not serve the purpose of reproduction), homosexual behavior becomes a useful target for those who, for one reason or another, have relinquished their moral disapproval of masturbation. The fact that one of these behaviors is a solitary act (mutual masturbation between heterosexuals was rarely if ever included in the moral case against masturbation) while the other involves sexual behavior between two individuals enables the displacement to work, as this serves the purposes of insuring that the connection between them will remain unconscious. (The purpose of this article is to bring it to consciousness.)

### The Mishandled Sex Life

Empirical support for this theoretical argument is provided by a book by Leslie D. Weatherhead, published in 1932, entitled *The Mastery of Sex Through Psychology and Religion*. While Weatherhead was an English clergyman, his book was published in New York as well as London, and went through at least eleven printings between 1932 and 1947 (the year my copy of the book was published). The book cover quotes from a review in *Methodist Recorder* that exclaimed, "Without any exaggeration it can be said that tens of thousands of young people will be deeply grateful for [Mr. Weatherhead's] latest. Nor will gratitude be confined merely to young people. It is a book for which parents and the unmarried will also be thankful. Many in middle life will wish that twenty years ago such a book had come into their hands." The cover goes on to claim that the book "should be of immense value to clergymen and parents, as well as to men and women of college age." The phrase "men and women of college age" suggests that the book targets the middle- and upper-class young people for whom, according to Menninger, masturbation was "the major sin."

*The Mastery of Sex Through Psychology and Religion* has chapters on the mistake of silence and ignorance about sexual matters, on comradeship and flirting, on the true approach to marriage, on the unhappy marriage, on the question of birth control (which Weatherhead strongly endorses), a message to those who do not marry, on the mishandled sex life, on sex and society, and on healthy-mindedness. The chapter that most concerns us here is chapter eight, "The Mishandled Sex Life," which covers the subjects of masturbation or self-abuse, inversion or homosexuality, fetishism, sadism and masochism, scopophilia and exhibitionism, and venereal disease. (Weatherhead seems not to be aware of the double entendre in the word "mishandled".) At 44 pages, it is the longest chapter in the book, and over half of the chapter (26 pages) is devoted to masturbation. The section on homosexuality ranks second, but at 7 pages it is about 27% the length of the masturbation section. This suggests that when Weatherhead's book first appeared (1932), masturbation was by far the most important topic requiring treatment in a chapter on the mishandling of one's sex life. Not only was homosexuality a very distant second, but the fact that Weatherhead devoted nearly half as many pages each to fetishism and venereal disease, and more than half as many to sadism and masochism, suggests that homosexuality was not a subject that he felt was of concern to his typical reader. This attitude is reflected in his citation of authors whose statistics on the prevalence of the practice of masturbation ranged from 95–99%, though he states that "my own experience would go to show the percentage much lower, both in men and women, but much higher than most people imagine" (p. 122). In contrast, while he asserts that homosexual behavior is "an exceedingly common one especially among unmarried women," it is probably the case that "true homosexuals are not more than 3 per cent of the population" (p. 152).

In his discussion of masturbation or self-abuse, Weatherhead distances himself from the view promoted “in olden days—not so very olden either” that this practice is “the blackest of all possible sins” and that anyone “who practiced it was pretty sure of hell” (p. 123). He notes that “our grandfathers, including our medical grandfathers,” taught that it was “not only a dreadful sin, but that it also had physical and mental consequences which were terrible; these consequences being regarded as the just punishment of God for human wickedness. It was said that the victim of this habit invariably brought disease upon himself and that if he did not speedily check it he would go mad. Asylums were said to be full of people brought there by this cause alone” (p. 123). Evidence that such views were still held in Weatherhead’s own day was a youth’s query of Weatherhead whether it is true that the substance of the brain runs down the spinal column and escapes with the seminal fluid. Another believed that it made entering into marriage immoral because it rendered its victim impotent.

Weatherhead assures his readers that, fortunately, “most of what was held to be true in regard to masturbation, physically, psychologically, and theologically, we now know to be vulgar nonsense” (p. 124). Physically, its effects are negligible: “A person may masturbate daily for twenty years and suffer no more physical disability than a slight and temporary devitalization” (p. 124). On the other hand, we cannot so easily dismiss the psychological consequences of masturbation, for “masturbation in the adult is nearly always due to a maladjustment to sex and its continuance maintains such maladjustment” (p. 124). He largely faults “the Victorian taboo on the discussion of sex problems” as the primary cause of such maladjustment, as the reason for it is due less to the act itself and more to “the false emotions with which it has been surrounded,” emotions “the intensity of which are out of all proportions to the seriousness of the habit” (p. 124). These emotions are guilt, shame, inferiority, self-loathing, horror, and, above all, fear.

### **Masturbation as Potentially Sinful**

But however much he regrets the sexual maladjustment that arises from the false emotions generated by “the Victorian taboo,” Weatherhead believes that there is another consideration that needs to be brought to bear. There is the theological question whether or not masturbation is a sin. While condemning the older theological view that masturbation has dire consequences (e.g., that anyone who practices it may go to hell for this), he considers it potentially sinful to the degree that it conjures up “mental pictures.” It is not the mental pictures per se, but what one does with them that determines whether masturbation is a sinful act. Because these pictures “come from the depths of the unconscious mind,” we have no moral responsibility for the mere fact that they appear. We do, however, have responsibility for what our conscious mind does with them. It isn’t necessary that we act on these pictures in the world around us. Rather, “masturbation becomes sin when such



thoughts are *deliberately entertained*" (his emphasis). Thus, what makes masturbation sinful "is not the act itself, but the conscious reliving of imaginative pictures conjured up by the mind which accompany the act and produce the first stirrings of sex excitement" (p. 126). He cites the case of a young man who masturbated five or six times a day and on every occasion "the act was accompanied by the working out of an imaginative scene in which he took a lustful part" (pp. 126–127). He notes in this connection Jesus' condemnation of the imaginative "looking" on a woman with intent to seduce her as "a way of committing adultery" (p. 127).

Weatherhead sees two dangers in the conscious entertaining of such imaginative scenarios. One is that a person may dwell on these mind pictures so long that one has no self-control when circumstances similar to the fantasy present themselves. The other is that one may come to believe that the mental picture has actually occurred, and this can lead to false allegations of seduction or rape. Not surprisingly, Weatherhead implies that men are more susceptible to the former danger while women are more prone to the latter.

While he views masturbation with conscious fantasy as sinful, he cautions that it is "no worse in the sight of God than, say, to lose one's temper" (p. 130). He also notes that everyone who has come to him for help has nearly always suffered from "an exaggerated sense of guilt," often referring to masturbation as "the unpardonable sin" (p. 130). He cannot believe that a sin which only harms the person who engages in it "can be so bad in the sight of Heaven as a sin such as spiritual pride" (p. 130). The "social cruelty" that results from such pridefulness is far worse, in his view, than masturbation, which normally harms only the person who engages in it.

### Cures for Masturbation

Weatherhead believes that masturbation is curable, and he sets forth a series of suggestions in this regard under the three headings of the psychological, religious, and physical. I will not discuss these suggestions in detail, but I do want to draw attention to his observation, under the heading of the psychological, that masturbation is an expression of narcissism, and for this reason is a form of "misdirected" sexual energy. Defining narcissism as "a psychological term which means a self-love that has become morbid," he encourages the adult masturbator to view the habit as a means of satisfying "an undeveloped, infantile self-love" (p. 134). Thus, he advises looking for and identifying one's hidden, thwarted, egoistic desires, and to redirect them toward more adult expressions of sexual desire. As the prevailing psychoanalytic view of homosexuality was that it, too, is narcissistic (Freud wrote in 1917: "Homosexual object-choice originally lies closer to narcissism than does the heterosexual kind. When it is a question, therefore, of repelling an undesirably strong homosexual impulse, the path back to narcissism is made particularly easy" [1966, p. 530]), Weatherhead was aware, no doubt, that he was making an indirect

association of masturbation and homosexuality, both of which are thus contrasted with mature heterosexuality.

Under the heading of the religious, Weatherhead suggests that because sex and religion are closely associated, religion provides excellent means for the sublimation of the desire to masturbate. He recommends training one's mind to focus on the face of Christ when it wants to picture sex fantasies, and notes that the picture of Christ blessing the little children, or as smiling and radiant, is better than picturing him as sad, anguished, and covered with thorns. (Since the practice of religious snakehandling emerged within the first decade of the 20th century and quickly spread throughout the Appalachian and Southern "Bible belt" states [Hood, 1998], and since serpent handlers typically hold and stroke the snake at the level of their own genitals while hopping and dancing about, it may be argued that this practice was also a religious form of sublimation.)

In his discussion of physical cures, Weatherhead recommends adult circumcision on the grounds that, in men, quite often "the foreskin is long, or tight, and rubbing on the clothing sets up an irritation to relieve which the organ is tickled, scratched or rubbed and the habit [of masturbation] begins . . . It is obvious enough that if the cause of such irritation can be removed it is the first thing to be done" (p. 141). It is well worth speculating whether the dramatic increase of circumcision of gentile newborns in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was not only for hygienic purposes (infections, etc.) but also to reduce the incidence of masturbation from childhood through adulthood.

### **Innate and Acquired Homosexuality**

Weatherhead views "inversion" or homosexuality as another example of the "misdirection" of the sexual instinct, for the "sex energies, instead of going out to the member of the opposite sex, are directed towards a member of the same sex" (p. 148). He identifies two forms of homosexuality, innate and acquired, and acknowledges that in its present state psychological science can do little to help those who are afflicted with the innate form. Alleviation through the use of hypnosis has been somewhat successful, but "the word ['talking'] cure could not fairly be used" (p. 149). Thus, treatment is generally directed to the deflecting of the sexual energies, the avoidance of all sex stimulation and the removal of the guilt-feelings which make the homosexual of this class feel a kind of outcaste or leper (p. 149). In other words, the sexual energies are redirected (i.e., sublimated) and "feelings of self-loathing and revulsion" are challenged on the grounds that this is a "congenital abnormality," probably "due to remote prenatal causes" (p. 149), and therefore neither vice nor sin.

Acquired homosexuality is more akin to masturbation in that it is not an innate "psychological disharmony," as is innate homosexuality, but a "practice"

in which one “indulges” with members of the same sex. Weatherhead focuses on the question of whether such practices are wrong among consenting adults. Citing the case of a woman of forty who considered herself “married” to a young girl of eighteen, he advances three points in favor of the argument that it is, in fact, wrong. First, any “perversion—here differing from a sublimation—always makes exceedingly difficult and frequently impossible the redirection of the sex energies to the biological [i.e., reproductive] channel if ever the way is opened up” (p. 150). While the 40-year-old woman could respond to this objection that this does not concern her, it *does* concern the 18-year-old girl “who has a reasonable expectation of normal marriage” (p. 150). It is “not right to do fellow beings an injury even if they welcome the injury” (p. 150). Weatherhead does not say whether he would therefore be approving of a sexual relationship between two postmenopausal women.

Second, the fact that the older woman raised the question with him indicated her “uneasiness of mind,” and subsequent inquiry showed that her uneasiness derived not from outmoded taboos but from the fact that her “religious feelings were hurt,” as her behavior was inconsistent with her “ideals and aspirations” (p. 151). That these hurt feelings, ideals and aspirations were shaped to a significant degree by the outmoded taboos is a point that Weatherhead neither considers nor addresses.

Third, and most potent for Weatherhead, is the psychological argument that in “inverted practices” the “sex instinct is roused and yet is not satisfied.” He compares it to bringing a hungry man to a hotel grill room so that he can smell the food, then not allowing him to eat it. To “stimulate each other’s sex instinct constantly and deny that instinct harmonious satisfaction is a practice fraught with peril indeed” (p. 151). While not wanting to seem “alarmist,” he observes that very few people have any idea of what an awakened and unsatisfied sex desire can do: “The passion becomes sometimes uncontrollable and may lead in extreme cases to that unpleasant kind of nervous disorder called nymphomania in women and satyriasis in men” (p. 152). He “has seen cases of nymphomania—uncontrollable passion in women—and I can only say I do not want to see another. Women of good birth and breeding have been driven by it to give themselves to anybody and even to have relations with animals to satisfy the pangs aroused within them” (p. 152). Here, Weatherhead makes a causal connection between homosexuality and sodomy, the third of Kant’s crimes against our animal nature.

Weatherhead believes that unless the “inversion” is innate, the very same methods recommended for the cure of masturbation may effect a cure for acquired homosexuality. He recognizes that it may be more resistant to treatment, and that in many cases the most that can be done “is the removal of morbid emotions and self-loathing, the reduction of sexual hyperaesthesia [i.e., unusual or pathological sensitivity of the skin], the fear that inversion is a sign of mental deficiency and the strengthening of the patient’s spiritual life so that he may not cause others to acquire

the perversion or endanger their well-being” (p. 154). Significantly, his argument that masturbation may be sinful when it is accompanied by a conscious entertaining of mental scenarios is avoided in the case of both forms of homosexuality. In fact, he contends that the “modern attitude must not be to label inversion as a loathsome vice . . . but as a psychological disharmony the causes of which we must investigate and the sufferers from which, with pity and skill, we must try to help” (p. 154). Of course, he does not normalize homosexuality, nor does he even consider the argument that homosexual behavior may be an expression of adult sexual desire and of “harmonious satisfaction” in its own right. But the fact that masturbation is so singularly and unqualifiedly narcissistic; that it typically involves the conscious entertaining of lustful mental pictures that may either be acted out in the real world or affect one’s ability to discriminate between what is real and what is imagined; and that it is so universal, makes it an especially pernicious practice, even to a person like himself who wants to set aside the “old taboos” and view it from the perspective of “a modern attitude.”

### **The Redirection of Moral Disapproval**

If, for Weatherhead, the primary forms of “the mishandled sex life” are masturbation and homosexuality, and if, for Menninger, masturbation has “disappeared” as a major sexually related sin, it should not surprise us if the moral disapproval directed against masturbation should be directed instead toward homosexual behavior. As Weatherhead himself emphasizes, the other forms of misdirected sexuality (fetishism, sadism and masochism, scopophilia—or voyeurism—and exhibitionism) are primarily matters that require more “technical” discussion than is appropriate for a text whose intended readership are young persons, their parents, and the clergy. That is, they clearly fall within the domain of psychiatry. He does not make similar caveats with respect to masturbation and homosexuality, thus implying that these two forms of misdirected sexuality are the concern of nonspecialists. This, in fact, is precisely the situation we find today. While nonexperts may continue to defer to the specialists on fetishism, scopophilia, and so forth, they do not hesitate to express their opinions and views on homosexuality. (They sometimes invoke “studies” by “specialists” to buttress these opinions.) Lack of expertise—much less a personal self-identification as homosexual—is no deterrent to making one’s views known on this particular form of “misdirected” sexuality. Homosexuality is therefore the only issue, aside from masturbation, that remains from Weatherhead’s forms of “mishandled sex life” for the nonspecialists who wish to engage in moral disapproval. It alone satisfies the need to engage in the “social cruelty” fueled by spiritual pride. Weatherhead’s view that persons who are “dreadfully shocked” by sex scandals are perhaps engaging in “a form of sex-gratification” may also apply to many who are currently engaged in morally-inspired attacks on persons who engage in homosexual practice. In any event, the one virtue of the view of

masturbation as a sinful act is that it aroused the vast majority of members of the religious culture to be morally introspective (even if this introspection was itself misdirected), whereas the current focus on homosexual behavior as sinful enables the vast majority of contemporary members of the religious culture to externalize their sense of sinfulness and engage, instead, in moral disapproval of others.

## CONCLUSION

The very year that Dr. Pope reported on his use of morphine to cure a 14-year-old boy of masturbation, and exactly 100 years *before* evangelist Ruth Carter Stapleton issued her rather stunning theological endorsement of masturbation in the *Atlanta Journal* (1979), Mark Twain delivered a brief, satirical talk on masturbation before a small group of American expatriates in Paris. The talk was considered so scandalous that it did not see print until 85 years later. Here is an excerpt from this talk:

Cetewayo, the Zulu hero, remarked, "A jerk in the hand is worth two in the bush." The immortal Franklin has said, "Masturbation is the mother of invention." He also said, "Masturbation is the best policy." Michelangelo said to Pope Julius II, "Self-negation is noble, self-culture is beneficent, self-possession is manly, but to the truly grand and inspiring soul they are poor and tame compared to self-abuse" (quoted in Szasz, 1984, p. 351).

Menninger views Havelock Ellis as "brave" and "far-visioned" for having complained in 1901 that Samuel Tissot's supposedly scientific views on masturbation were heavily influenced by "religious fanaticism." But Twain had made essentially the same point several decades earlier. What could have been a liberating word was instead silenced.

This history should be instructive for those who have moral and/or religious objections to homosexual behavior. As we have seen, these objections have essentially the same moral basis as previous objections to masturbation, that is, that the primary purpose of sexual activity is reproduction, and neither masturbation nor homosexuality meet this criterion. However, if the vast majority of sexual acts between heterosexual adults do not culminate in reproduction of the species, and if excessive or indiscriminate reproduction is itself subject to moral censure, why did the reproductive purpose of sexual behavior come to have such prestige among the various other purposes that it may serve (as affording pleasure, as expression of intimacy, of love, etc.)?

One plausible explanation is that the preeminence of reproduction as an aim of sexual behavior was an effect of the discovery that the male has a role in conception. As David Bakan points out in *The Duality of Human Existence* (1966):

One of the pervasive themes that runs through the Bible is that there is a *biological role for the male in conception*. We may presume that there was a time in history prior to Biblical times in which this was not known. It is certainly not "obvious." Sexual intercourse can take place without conception. The interval between conception and either the signs of pregnancy or the birth of a child is considerable. And whether a particular woman has had intercourse or

not often remains her “secret.” If we consider a two-way table with pregnancy-no pregnancy on one axis and intercourse-no intercourse on the other, observation would show that there are instances of pregnancy and no pregnancy with intercourse; and definitive data in the no intercourse cells are hard to come by. We can presume that there was an early “scientist” who made the discovery of the relationship between sexuality and pregnancy (p. 202, his emphasis).

Bakan further imagines that this “discovery” would have at first been resisted, as “the natural development of the male ego does not usually encompass the ejaculated semen” (p. 202). He suggests that the Bible expresses the effort of males to come to terms with this “discovery” by extending the boundary of their ego to include their semen or “seed,” and thereby develop the idea that the male is even more important in procreation than the female, “as seed is the determining factor of the nature of the plant, with the soil, water, and sun playing only enabling roles” (p. 203). Thus, Onan’s act of spilling his semen on the ground to avoid consummation of intercourse with his brother’s widow, thus refusing to provide his brother an heir, is described in Gen. 38:9 as a refusal to “give seed to his brother.” (Onanism is thus a term for both coitus interruptus and masturbation.) Onan’s refusal was so “displeasing” to the Lord that he slew him. By emphasizing the value of their “seed,” and thus their (literally) seminal role in reproduction, males could assert their biological priority in the reproductive process and hence their superiority in procreation. The primacy of patrilineal descent was itself the heir of this “scientific” discovery.

If Bakan’s argument is correct, this would help to explain why the religious culture has such a stake in defending heterosexual sexual behavior against homosexual behavior. At the same time, it exposes the rationale behind the reproductive argument. The survival of the species is not the crucial issue; after all, nuclear or biochemical catastrophe pose a much greater threat to its survival than the fact that a percentage of men and women do not engage in the reproductive process. This is a smokescreen erected to disguise the deeper motivation behind it, the assertion of male superiority and privilege.

May we expect that the religious culture will soon abandon its moral disapproval of homosexual behavior? Freud’s suggestion that the leadership structures of the army and the church are remarkably similar (1960, pp. 32–39) bears on this question, as it appears that these two inherently traditionalist and conservative institutions tend to view this issue in remarkably similar ways and to use very similar procedures in handling cases of “deviance” from the prescribed—that is, heterosexual—norms. Whether this similarity is grounds for hope or despair may depend on social forces beyond the control of either institution. But, in any event, these two institutions have rarely in the past been numbered among the vanguard as far as the abandonment of long cherished traditions of privilege and prejudice is concerned. As the suppression of Mark Twain’s 1879 satire on masturbation would seem to suggest, the religious institutions, in taking themselves—and their deliberations—so seriously (see Saraglou and Jaspard, 2000), tend, in the end, to

make *themselves* a laughingstock, fair game for ridicule and the all-too-familiar charge of moral hypocrisy.

### CODA

After this article was accepted for publication, I was reading through back issues of *Pastoral Psychology* for another purpose and stumbled onto a brief article by Thomas J. Bigham, Moral Professor at General Theological Seminary, "Pastoral and Ethical Notes on Problems of Masturbation," published in 1960 (Bigham, 1960). He argues against the tendency of theologian Emil Brunner to engage in "ethical simplifications" with regard to masturbation; and of pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner to reduce its psychological complexity to a matter of the will. He also contends against the "tradition of punitive disapproval" which emphasizes the "evil consequences of masturbation" and fails to recognize its more positive indications. If it is a "retreat from life," it is a retreat that is "only possible because there has been some advance, and therefore [it] is a positive sign" (p. 23). This advance is the achievement of puberty, and masturbation is therefore a sign of a desire for something better, namely, full growth (p. 23).

Bigham's effort to provide a more sensitive, enlightened approach to masturbation is significant in itself, as it supports my argument that moral disapproval of masturbation was beginning to lessen in the 1960s. But even more striking to me was that the journal editor or publisher chose to locate an advertisement for a new book on how to counsel the homosexual on the top right hand corner of the last page of Bigham's article. The advertisement proclaims: "Without mincing words, the Rev. Robert W. Wood here becomes the first to offer a way for homosexuals to enter the Christian community and join the Church, yet remain homosexuals without fear or guilt or apology" (p. 23). As represented by the advertisement, the author's position was clearly liberal for its time. Yet, the message conveyed is that the homosexual, not the Christian community itself, requires pastoral counsel. (The writer's use of the word "mincing" may also betray some unconscious feeling toward homosexuals). However one views the content of the advertisement, its placement on the last page of an article on masturbation is striking evidence in support of the argument of this paper. An era was ending, a page was turning.

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