

***Christian Action Commission papers on pornography***

Human Sexuality: Sexism and Pornography <i>MGS 1978: 189-192</i>	2
Human Sexuality: Pornography in U. S. Culture <i>MGS 1978: 193-199</i>	6
Overture: Study of the Issue of Pornography <i>MGS 1986:104-105</i>	13
Pornography <i>MGS 1987: 55-58</i>	14

## **Human Sexuality: Sexism and Pornography**

One medical doctor defines pornography as “a daydream in which activities are projected into written or pictorial material to induce genital excitement in an observer.” [1] These depictions, he adds, are not pornographic in themselves—they become so when the observer’s fantasies are added. No fantasy, no pornography.

He goes on to say that pornography is also dependent upon the existence of a victim. No matter how disguised, pornography always has a victim or object. No fantasy, no victim, no pornography.

A further peculiarity of pornography is that it is generally produced and used by men. It has been speculated that if pornography depended upon female consumers, the industry would quickly die. On the other hand, pornography depends heavily on women, for “no victim, no pornography” is synonymous with “no women, no pornography.” Women are the primary victims of pornography.

The word “victim” implies a condition of directed, intentional hostility. To be victimized means to be in some way the object of someone’s aggression. In-deed, sociologists and psychologists assert that pornography is a means by which men express fantasied thoughts or actions of sexual aggression or revenge toward women. Rollo May points out that it is no accident that the most common expletive in our contemporary language to express latent hostility is a colloquialism for sexual intercourse. [2]

Accepting the premise that pornography is an expression of latent male hostility, then our task is to examine some of the reasons why this might be so.

What is it about the “sexual politics” between men and women which gives rise to unnatural and non-biblical perversions of human sexuality? Why are women the pornographically exploited sex?

It is our intent here to relate the phenomenon of pornography to sexism. Although sexism certainly is not the single cause for the popularity of pornography, it does play a major role in any attempt to discover the reason for the exploitation of women in pornography.

The words “sexist” and “sexism” have come to be used rather loosely in the past several years. Specifically they refer to “all the beliefs, values, attitudes and practices which create and maintain an environment in which one sex . . . is conceptually and behaviorally favored over the other. Sexism divides all human qualities into two sharply delineated and incompatible categories, one a power configuration, the other a caring-serving configuration, and through profound sanctions and reinforcing institutions, provides for the internalization of these configurations by men and women respectively.” [3]

In our culture, sexism sets forth maleness as humanness, normal standard. To womanhood are ascribed the qualities of not-manhood. In other words, all the things men aren’t supposed to be, women are: nurturing, chaste, loyal, receptive, impulsive, dependent, naive, virginal. Conversely, men are all the things women aren’t supposed to be: strong, aggressive, self-assured, independent, organized, emotionally cool, knowing, sexual. Man is the seed-producer, woman the seed-bearer. As exemplified in this poetic

perception, “she is the mysterious keeper of all the gentler dreams and colors of life; through her men may safely enjoy what they dare not harbor in themselves. [4]

Because of these traditional and formidable sexist delineations, men ascribe certain qualities or powers to women and vice versa. These ascriptions and their manifestations are comprised in the term “sexual politics.” This phrase seeks to describe the overt and covert dynamics of power in male-female relationships. “Sexual politics” encompasses the powers which men and women perceive each other as having, and the way those perceptions (or misperceptions) affect relationships.

It should be understood that “sexual politics” does not necessarily suggest a negative condition. Men and women do indeed have varied characteristics and powers, and these can be a positive aspect of the gift of sexuality. Their expression is both desirable and natural. Power is not an inherently negative word—it becomes so only when it is misperceived and abused. Sexual power is abused when it is based on sexism: when the powers and needs of men are perceived to be more important than those of women and vice versa.

There are two powers which men may perceive women as having over them. The first is expressive power—the ability to express emotions. Since men are “not supposed” to express emotions, many experience them vicariously through women. They may depend on women simply for help in expressing themselves, or to fully express their emotions for them. One clinical psychologist says that at the ultimate level, many men are unable to feel emotionally alive except through relationships with women. [5]

A second form of power which men attribute to women is the power to validate their masculinity. There are certain prescribed attitudes or actions which women perform for men in order to affirm and strengthen their masculinity. This power is best exercised by women acting as “feminine” as possible—that is, by not exhibiting any of the characteristics which sexist society has reserved for men only. Above all, women are not to initiate leadership in any male realms, including sex. They should not ask questions, make plans, offer opinions. They are to remain willing and accessible only, if they want to validate masculinity. They should simply be there as symbols of non-threatening refuge.

These traditionally sexist attitudes regarding women place heavy burdens on them. “By and large, these are not powers over men that women have wanted to hold. These are powers that men have handed over to women, by defining the male role as being emotionally cool and inexpressive, and as being ultimately validated by heterosexual success.” [6] These are powers which men do not wish to have, but insist that women exercise.

There are, however, many women who view themselves in the same ways that men view them. They have no internalized masculine perspectives that they cannot see, or do not object to, such strict role delineations. They accept their “place” as naturally inherited and therefore valid. As sexist men need women for masculine validation, sexist women accept that “assignment” and view it as the proper female role. Thus the circle closes—women feel feminine when they make men feel masculine.

In summary: sexist men attribute to women the powers of vicarious emotional expression and affirmation of masculinity. Both are powers which serve men. Sexist women accept these powers as being naturally feminine, thereby depending on men’s needs for their own sense of femininity. In serving men, they feel like women.

If we follow these orientations to their negative extreme, the relationship between sexism and pornography becomes apparent. For if men do indeed depend on women to fulfill such basic needs as the ones described above, alteration or withholding of these powers for any length of time could have only negative consequences. Women who are viewed as the preservers of potency inflict serious damage to the male psyche if those powers are denied. Women who cannot or refuse to perform their “duties” in the manner prescribed by society suddenly become threatening and dangerous. The power to validate masculinity carries with it the power to emasculate. The hostility toward the feminist movement reveals the nature of the threat: “Women’s Libbers want to reject their true femininity . . . make men impotent . . . castrate men . . . dominate men, etc. etc.” [8]

The hostility which such a view of women engenders in men finds expression in pornography. It provides the means by which men can consciously or unconsciously retaliate toward women in their personal histories who have failed to affirm their sexuality. Pornography “condenses in itself the subject’s sexual life history—his memories and fantasies, traumas, frustrations and joys. Pornography is for restitution.” [9]

The appeal of pornography is that sexual gratification does not have to be offered; a depersonalized commodity, it is simply taken. Pornography is a non-violent form of rape which disregards the personhood of women in favor of the sexual gratification they provide. “One easily sees therein a power struggle disguised as sexuality: the dangerous woman who is reduced to a victim and the boy, who, by means of pornography becomes a man.” [10]

Pornography then, may be viewed as a means by which men attempt to reassert masculine power over women who withhold their supposed ability to make men feel like real men. The easiest way to assert power over women is to strip them not only of their clothing, but of their strength, assertiveness, their sense of self. In such a condition, women are conveniently exploitable and sexually exciting—stripped of the privacy of their own sexuality, they reinforce male sexuality by default.

(Here an important distinction must be made. Sexist society has determined that “proper” women should not need or enjoy sex. Double standards have not allowed women to seek sexual fulfillment in the same ways that men do. Women who make overt sexual remarks or admit to being excited by nudity are labelled as “fast”, “loose,” “promiscuous” or “unlady-like”. However, such comments made by men are often dismissed with a “men will be men” smile.

The need for emotional intimacy and affection is thought to be a feminine desire, whereas it is assumed that men are aroused simply by sweating anatomy, nudity or tales of bizarre sexual encounters. Sexist society has wrongly assigned sexual fulfillment through romance and emotional intimacy to women, [11] and sexual fulfillment through pornographic stimuli to men.

It is evident then that pornography is based in sexist traditions and serves sexist people. It affirms the notion that men need women most for sexual fulfillment and that women need to serve men in this way. Pornography illustrates the consequences when such an arrangement does not exist.

The man who receives sexual satisfaction by the stimulus of pornography has found a way to possess what women symbolize to him without having to deal with the realities of an intimate relationship. He victimizes women by taking from them that which is not

given. There is no threat because there is no need to reciprocate. There is no concern over feelings or future. Pornography offers to men the powers of women for free: convenient sexual gratification without in-convenient relationships.

**Quotations:**

1. Robert J. Stoller. "Pornography and Perversion" in *The Case Against Pornography*, David Holbrook, editor. La Salle, Illinois, Open Court, 1973, p. 111.
2. Rollo May. "Paradoxes of Sex and Love in Modern Society" in Holbrook, p. 22.
3. Sheila Ruth. "Sexism, Patriarchy, and Feminism" in *Women & Men: The Consequences of Power*, D. Hiller and R. A. Sheets, editors. Cincinnati, University of Cincinnati, 1976, p. 50.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
5. Joseph H. Pleck. "Men's Power with Women, Other Men, and Society: A Men's Movement Analysis" in Hiller and Sheets, p. 14.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
7. Joyce J. Walstedt. "An Exploration of Female Powerlessness: The Altruistic Other Orientation" in Hiller and Sheets, p. 153.
8. Sheila Ruth in Hiller and Sheets, p. 47.
9. Robert J. Stoller in Holbrook, p. 111.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

**Additional Resources:**

- Susan Brownmiller. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1975.
- Harvey Cox. "Playboy's Doctrine of the Male" in *Christianity and Crisis*, April 17, 1961.

## **Human Sexuality: Pornography in U. S. Culture**

The issue of pornography is one which challenges the Christian community in a number of ways, we believe that our religious convictions commit us to a clear perception about human sexuality. As such we must be assertive in our affirmation of sexuality and a sexual expression which is consistent within the con-text of respect for wholeness of personhood. We are bound, by our religious affirmations, to take strong positions against any violations and perversions of this kind of sexual expression. We engage in this study by using the following definitions of pornography:

1) Pornography is a form of violence which removes us from a healthy conception of our sexuality. It represents an assault on the natural development of sexuality which we believe to be within the context of mutuality and respect for humans as expressed in loving, caring relationships.

2) Pornography is the objectification of women, children and men as sources for sexual gratification.

3) Pornography is the victimization of women through many forms of physical and psychological rape. Women experience this oppression as nothing short of physical humiliation and a form of psychological terrorism. A result of the aggression of male sexuality, it is typical of the kind of intimidation used to maintain patriarchal forms of dominance in our society.

4) Pornography is the systemic trivialization of sexual relationships by the stripping away of their human substance and content. This includes both our over-romantization of love and sexuality and a false sense of reality as it is portrayed in male dominated family movies, hard-core porno movies, and daytime TV.

5) Pornography is the commodification of sexuality for the purposes of economic profit and a false sense of sexual gratification. Profiteering off the bodies of women and the false needs of blocked and deflected male sexuality is both manipulative of personal lives and helps to sustain distorted views of sexual relatedness. It adds to the attitude people have that erotic sexual expression is somehow evil but available for a price.

6) Pornography is the exploitation of victims by a sexually sublimated (deflected) and repressed (blocked) culture, one which prevents the attainment of the natural goal of sexuality. The socialization process conducted by all institutions of the society (including many times the family, schools, churches, workplaces, marriages, and so forth) work within the particular cultural context in which they exist, to remove people from a sense of their own sexual identity and from affirming assertively their own sexuality.

7) Pornography is any attempt to equate greater sexual license with what is necessary to bring about greater sexual liberation. To equate real sexual freedom with apparent sexual freedom.

### **Cultural Background**

We come from a historical tradition which does as much damage to our understanding of sexuality as it does to provide us with ethical guidelines to take a firm stand in favor of its healthy expression. On the one hand, we have affirmed a conservative sexual ethic

based on the principles that looseness and irresponsibility in sexual behavior causes a breakdown in the reverence we have for loving and structured relationships. On the other hand, such a sexual ethic sometimes causes fear, guilt, inhibition, manipulation and perversion in the natural expression of sexuality as it has been socialized throughout the development of persons. This morality makes us shy and ignorant in our talking about sexuality. There is an entire vocabulary of legitimate words and expressions that we are uncomfortable with because they relate to sex. Our jokes reveal the level at which we are comfortable talking about sexuality.

### **Double Standards of Sexual Practice**

1) Men are allowed considerable latitude in their independent expression of their sexuality. Men are allowed to make mistakes for which they will be socially forgiven. Such male mistakes do not generally affect their standing in the community and in the eyes of other men and they are, of course, at the expense of women. Women are much more restricted and oppressed in their sexual expression. Women suffer alienation when caught in violation of the same sexual mores.

2) Social class is another variable in how we understand types of sexual repression and expression. We are sharply critical of hard-core movies and Hustler Magazine and less critical of sexually suggestive advertising and Playboy Magazine. We attack the blatant use of sex-peep shows for sexual gratification while we are less critical of the more fashionable construction of sexual fantasies which exists for the upper classes—the focus of the media on cheerleaders attire (or lack of it) during the Superbowl, hot-pants stewardesses and cocktail waitresses and TV soap operas. Classes of people in this society not only experience radically different material existences but are correspondingly socialized with value structures which legitimize these material conditions, and different concepts about social relations. The variety of types of sexual repression and pornography will vary correspondingly. We too often fail to see that causes of this repression grow from a cultural sense of relational logic as well as a sexist one. We judge lower income and working class distortion of sexual expression as porno and moral decay without seeing the relationship of sexual gratification in their everyday life as often frustrated by images through the media which are aimed at a group of people that don't in reality exist. People frustrated by what is not attainable, at any level in society, will develop all kinds of perversions as a way of adapting their personal needs to the real environment. We condone in-directly upper class porno, which is just as inhuman and degrading, because it has been legitimized and masked to fit into the sexual mores with which we are more familiar. We are correct and quick to judge with condemnation the outrageous forms of pornography (child exploitation as a good example) but we are too slow to notice subtle pornographic ads on our nation's billboards.

### **Pornography: Symptom of Society**

Our analysis of pornography and its social manifestations is limited by the way in which we often approach the topic. We accept the fact that pornography is not simply another issue which is separate and unrelated to the totality of our cultural order. We reject such a liberal tendency in our study. If we understand it to be simply sin,

perversion, decadence, filth and moral decay then we will arrive at limited solutions. We will end up affirming human decency, sexual wholeness and ethical purity, which is all well and good—but not sufficient.

1) Our analysis of pornography must also include the responses to some very clear questions. To say only that pornography exists because people are weak by nature will not suffice by itself as an explanation to this complex phenomenon. What is the role of societal structures and socialization processes which encourage a deflected and distorted sexuality? How does this form of sexuality evolve into pornographic expressions? 2) Pornography causes violence because it destroys our ability to attain lasting and authentic forms of interpersonal sexual relationships. Rather, it exists to perpetuate an outlet for the immediate sexual gratification of people which rests on a false sense of intimacy and the construction of fantasies. How does our economic orientation feed a pornographic industry based on quick profits, exploited labor and commodity marketing? How does our sexist culture produce and encourage by its very logic of social relations, a pornographic conception of sexual relationship? 3) We refuse to accept the naive position that because sexuality is private that it is not political. Pornography is political because it claims power over the sexual identities of people. For example, it is political because it perpetuates a false sense of male identity, superiority and security in a patriarchal order. It is political because it creates a form of consciousness which violates the sensibilities we have as Christian people proclaiming wholeness and mutuality in human relationships.

### **Pornography and Civil Liberties**

It is widely understood that the dilemma regarding pornography and its social implications has to do with the tensions between one's civil liberties to distribute material, print material and make movies or to read material and look at movies; and what should legally be imposed on one's personal business. People who argue the liberal position of civil liberties ask for a politic which is based on the presupposition that if no one is done bodily harm and if sexuality is expressed privately or between consenting adults, that it should be legally permissible—as a matter of rights. We are suspicious about the use of the conception of "rights" when they are made to include forms of justifying violence against women, children and men (violence in the deeper sense of the term), repression of the healthy sexual development of persons and a manipulation of our sex lives to serve the broader interests of reinforcing cultural social relations. We realize that taking an anti-civil libertarian viewpoint has dangerous implications for our future political freedom. Nonetheless, we find a curious blend of conservative and radical analysis which leads us to challenge civil liberties that violate our clearest religious convictions about a social issue.

1) We call attention to another concept of "rights" which affirms the dignity of all people—men, women and children, and one which necessitates the creation of a cultural order which produces a healthier view of sexual wholeness; civil rights which emphasize, uncompromisingly, the mutual self-empowerment of all people to a non-repressed personal development and to a non-manipulated sexual growth. While they have been held as an ideal for everyone, civil liberties have too often been used in our nation's history by those who have the actual class, sex and racial privileges to attain them. We

affirm our national ideals but we call them into question when they are interpreted in such a way as to deny the fundamental necessity of creating a social order which is not exploitive. 2) We therefore call for a re-examination of such fundamentals as "freedom of the press". Not that we will tolerate a society which destroys our ability to get information and investigate openly and to exchange freely new and creative ideas, stories and forms of entertainment, but that we will not tolerate violence to women, men and children and repression of our sexuality through degradation and oppression in the media. We want these principles of our faith to be held as non-negotiables in the construction of our society and we want our civil liberties to be developed within the allegiances to these principles. 3) We believe that in such a society, a logic of social relations will arise which will have in it, little space for the generation of sexual perversion and pornography. We believe that people are heavily influenced by the culture (and its values) in which they grow up: the dictatorship of the unconscious. We must meet such a challenge by active involvement in criticism of our culture and its systems—both political and economic as well as ideological. We must be clear about the role of caring, human relationships in a society which minimizes such relatedness in its everyday life bureaucracies. Pornography is interrelated and interconnected with the totality of our experience; within our religious and social ethics as well as within the relationships that we engage in every day.

### **Pornography and Therapy**

Pornography as we have defined it, could never be used to 'solve' a sexual problem. It may relieve a particular sexual dilemma and relational block of some sort, but it will inevitably continue to perpetuate (at some level) the deeper problematics of distorted sexual attitudes. We may be able to measure the immediate success of such a solution but will be unable to gauge the consequences of the deeper attitudes legitimized in the process and we will not have recognized the wider cultural reality which makes such a solution workable in the first place.

On the other hand, we recognize the contradictions of living in a society such as ours and the need to help people with specific and immediate solutions to their sexual problems. We therefore believe that sexual therapies can and should be developed which increase people's sensitivity to their bodies, to the sexual needs of their partners, to people's erotic nature and to a creative awareness of sensuality. We think that this can be done through non-pornographic methods and strategies, Porno has no good use except as a way to expose and understand the negative realities of human sexual expression. Sexual therapy is something we affirm in its most creative and venturesome forms. But sexual liberation is its goal, not the continuance of illusory forms of sexual freedom.

### **AFFIRMATION ON HUMAN SEXUALITY**

*First:* Our human sexuality is a gift from God. Our sexuality is given to facilitate our exit from a pre-occupation with self into that community of relationships which God intends for us. Our sexuality is that mysterious bond which grants us entry into the life of others and eventually is the link which binds us to the mystery of the life of God himself, as we become collaborators with him, in the continuing work of creation.

*Second:* Our human sexuality is not to be seen exclusively as a matter of personal preference, for this very personal reality has social, economic, moral and religious considerations of which we must always be aware. We make our decisions not in solitude, but in solidarity with the Covenant community.

*Third:* Our human sexuality is not synonymous with external conformity expressed, but is preeminently concerned with the motive and intention of the individual as we increasingly discover that the real issues of morality and immorality are waged within the deepest recesses of the human spirit.

*Fourth:* Our human sexuality must reflect a social ethic which encompasses sexual expression, practice and attitude. This ethic presupposes a critique of the social realities which assault (by any and all means) the mental conception and actual practice of such an ethic.

*Fifth:* Our human sexuality becomes idolatrous and inhumane when it permits us to debase and depersonalize our fellow human beings. Our human sexuality is to mirror the very nature of our gracious God himself. Our sexuality is given to be exercised within the context of loving, supportive and caring mutuality, for in this we discover what it is to be fashioned in the "image of God".

*Sixth:* Our outward expression of human sexuality is derived from the nature of people as culturally shaped (specifically with respect to sex and social class). Human sexuality is both deflected from its natural development and repressed by the very logic of our cultural understanding of social relations. People's sexuality is objectified, exploited and commodified. Sexual relationships are trivialized. Sexual license and freedom is systemically confused with sexual liberation. We affirm a theology about the nature of people and a culture which influences people's lives which can be genuinely liberating. Ways must be explored to construct an image of sexual expression which is both biblically responsive and honestly sensitive and critical to the realities in which we live.

### *FILMS*

History has shown us that films known as or carrying the rating of "X" or beyond have been the product of exploitative profiteering people. We deplore their making and distribution and call for legal action to stop this.

THEREFORE, the Christian Action Commission RECOMMENDS:

**R-1. THAT General Synod urge the members of the RCA to call upon their legislators to enact legislation to control pornographic film-making, and further,**

**THAT the Church Herald be encouraged to print a review of current films.  
(ADOPTED)**

### *TELEVISION*

WHEREAS,

the media of television has shown itself as a major propagator of material which is not reflective of human sexuality in the light of God's love for the individual, and since the television medium too often objectifies and perverts the human sexual

being, and we believe that the members of Christ's Church should take positive action towards becoming more aware of the adverse effects of this medium to our sexual attitudes:

THEREFORE, the Christian Action Commission RECOMMENDS:

- R-2. THAT General Synod call upon the churches, and therefore church members, to make known objections to such television programming to their families, friends and to those who more directly control the media when television portrays an image of human sexuality abhorrent to the biblical images of persons. (ADOPTED)**

*ADVERTISING*

WHEREAS

pornography is increasingly evident in more and more aspects of American life and,

WHEREAS

it is becoming more and more evident in the advertising which we experience and,

WHEREAS

there is no such thing as objectionable material—UNLESS SOME-ONE OBJECTS.

THEREFORE, the Christian Action Commission RECOMMENDS:

- R-3. THAT the General Synod call upon the membership of the Reformed Church in America to respond to this desensitizing "spillage" from blatant pornography to subtle pornography, from the advertising of pornography to pornographic advertising as we personally determine and boycott those who indulge in these advertising techniques and inform them of our decisions and actions born out of our commitment to be good stewards of God's precious gifts. (ADOPTED)**

WHEREAS,

in the light of the foregoing resolutions, it becomes obvious that it is not only necessary for Christians to make their negative opinions known in the area of films, advertising, TV programming, etc., but also necessary to voice our affirmation of materials which we find worthwhile and wholesome:

THEREFORE, the Christian Action Commission RECOMMENDS:

- R-4. That General Synod call upon the people of the church to exercise their individual responsibility to respond positively to television programs, advertisements, films, etc. which sustain the level of human worth we feel is God's will for his people. (ADOPTED)**

*CHILDREN*

WHEREAS,

there is no question that children are exploited in the production of pornographically printed material and films and are in no way protected by the First Amendment, and

WHEREAS,

child abuse in any form, but particularly in this sexual form, together with its attendant permanent damage, is abhorrent to Christians:

THEREFORE, the Christian Action Commission RECOMMENDS:

- R-5. That General Synod, recognizing that sexual exploitation is child abuse, call upon the churches, and therefore, church members, to support legislation at all levels of government making child abuse a crime, and actively use those means to bring the offenders to justice. (ADOPTED)**

#### *EDUCATION*

WHEREAS,

pornography is a plague which is increasing in scope; and

WHEREAS,

the growth of pornography is tied to a lack of knowledge regarding human sexuality; and

WHEREAS,

the educative means are available to the body of Christ:

THEREFORE, the Christian Action Commission RECOMMENDS:

- R-6. That the General Synod urge the churches of the RCA to avail themselves of the various types of Christian sex education materials, marriage enrichment, preparation and growth seminars, and those groups involved in halting the spread of pornography, and that as much as is possible the education process occur at the family and church level. Re-sources are available through the Office of Family Life. (ADOPTED)**

The Commission additionally RECOMMENDS:

- R-7. That our seminaries provide training for ministerial candidates in the field of sex education counseling and that as a part of their continuing education, all RCA ministers seek to prepare themselves to serve their local families as a resource in human sexuality. (ADOPTED)**

*Overture: Study of the Issue of Pornography*

1. The Particular Synod of New York overtures the General Synod to study the issue of pornography and report back to the 1987 General Synod with specific recommendations to the churches.

Reasons:

1. The General Synod has not given special attention to the issue of pornography since the Commission on Christian Action report of 1972.
2. Pornography as an industry is large and probably growing. There are more pornographic magazines sold than the combined sales of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Sports Illustrated*. There are 3 1/2 times more pornography shops than there are McDonalds restaurants, and the pornography industry generates more income than that which is needed to operate the combined state budgets of Iowa and North Carolina (according to William P. Kelly, a former FBI obscenity investigator).
3. Pornography often has negative effects on individual behavior. It is linked to misinformation about sexuality in youth. It is related to negative sexual development in adults. It typically glorifies the physical aspect of sex but under emphasizes the relational aspect. It especially victimizes women and children.
4. The Reformed Church in America would benefit from a fresh report on this issue and could take new action based upon a commission's recommendations.

The advisory committee recommended:

R-32.

**To instruct the Christian Action Commission, in consultation with the Commission on Women, to study the issue of pornography, especially child pornography, specifically looking at new evidence about the behavioral impact of pornography and the social conditions which cause it to flourish, and to report its findings and recommendations to the General Synod of 1987. (ADOPTED AS AMENDED)\***

Reason:

In addition to affirming the reasons provided in the overture, the advisory committee is aware of substantial sociological and psychological studies that have recently linked the use of pornography to violence and other anti-social behavior.

\* Additions are in light-face type.

## Pornography

The 1986 General Synod instructed this commission to study the issue of pornography, giving special attention to child pornography, the new behavioral evidence on the effects of pornography, and conditions within which pornography flourishes (*MGS* 1986, pp. 104-105).

Pornography is of ongoing concern. The General Synod received reports from this commission in 1972 (*MGS* 1972 pp. 203-206) and again in 1978 (*MGS* 1978, pp. 185-199). These reports concluded that pornography represents the dehumanization of the person and perverts the nature of sexuality as a way of expressing humanness.

The 1978 study expanded the definition of pornography to include violence against the person, most specifically against those used as objects for sexual gratification, especially women and children. The 1978 study concluded with a series of recommendations that called on the church to affirm the positive nature of sexuality through education, and to support images in our culture that reinforce the biblical view of person. That Synod also urged the churches to oppose the production of pornographic materials and especially the violence done to children in the production of such material.

When talking about pornography, one must be careful to delineate just what is meant. Although pornography is generally understood to be that which simply offends, and thus what counts as pornography tends to be highly subjective, the commission offers some definitional clarity. Pornography is that material which promises to fulfill the quest for human sexuality by dehumanizing either other persons, the person offered the promise, or both. While pornography is usually associated with the perversion of sexuality, and while that use of the term is now under consideration by the Synod, the commission reminds the church that pornography has a much wider scope. In our society, sexual pornography most often results in the dehumanization of women and children by portraying these persons as objects for sexual fulfillment. This in turn leads us to the suggestion that pornography sets the stage for a violent sort of dehumanization.

Since 1978 there has been much study aimed at discovering a link between pornography and violence. Recent conclusions from the social scientific community tend to lend credence to the intuitive sense that pornography leads to aberrant sexual behavior or to violence. A gathering of researchers called together by the US Surgeon General offered the following statements of consensus from their study:

1. Children and adolescents who participate in the production of pornography experience adverse, enduring effects.
2. Prolonged use of pornography increases beliefs that less common sexual practices are more common.
3. Pornography that portrays sexual aggression as pleasurable for the victim increases the acceptance of the use of coercion in sexual relations.
4. Acceptance of coercive sexuality appears to be related to sexual aggression.
5. In laboratory studies measuring short-term effects, exposure to violent pornography increases punitive behavior toward women. (*Report of the Surgeon General's Workshop on Pornography and Public Health*, pp. 13-39.)

The commission is cautious in its use of these conclusions, for the researchers themselves state:

Pornography has been consistently linked to changes in some perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. These links, however, are circumscribed, few in number, and generally laboratory-based. To say that this means any observed effects are antifactual, however, would be in error. Pornography does have effects; it is just not yet known how widespread or powerful they really are. There is a clear lack of extensive knowledge or unifying theory, and global statements about the effects of exposure to pornography have not yet been substantiated. (Ibid., p. 35)

However, the commission does note that the conclusion of these studies support the position previously taken by the General Synod.

The research since 1978 offers further reason for concern, especially for children. This commission is especially troubled by the abuse of children and the images of sexuality transmitted to all children through pornography. In the first instance, children themselves are made direct victims of violence against their person. In the second instance, children are raised in a culture that condones the victimization- of others. The producers of pornographic material defend their action by claiming the right to a free spread of ideas, including, one presumes, the idea that the sexual use of children is a healthy and proper expression of sexuality. While sensitive to the notion of the right to free expression as a means by which truth can emerge into the public domain, we reject the use of rights as a legitimate defense. Scripture offers a picture of an “inequality of rights “ The God revealed in history is a God of the widow and the orphan; that is, a God of the powerless, the victim. Jesus himself was Victim, standing in for all the world’s victims as evil did its worst. Thus, too, the church must stand on the side of children, vigorously supporting efforts to eradicate child pornography through the enforcement of labor laws, laws against child abuse, and the like.

The second abuse to children is the evergrowing availability of pornographic material to children. This is especially evident in the “video revolution” whereby young persons can enter video outlets to rent pornographic tapes for viewing on home video equipment.

The church’s response to this reality is of a different order than its response to the use of children themselves in pornography. We have often far too quickly responded negatively to any explicit sexual portrayal. Human sexuality is a gift to our nature. To call for the banning of all sexually explicit material would not be coherent with a Christian affirmation of our sexual nature. It would, in fact, be a denial of our human nature, the very humanness that God so fully and finally affirms in the Incarnation of his Son.

‘Thus congregations should support sexual education in the home, in the school, and most especially in the church. It is from within the community of faith that we can educate our children to choices made within the values that come to us as a people shaped by the God who is Lord of all of life. The General Program Council’s Office of Education and Faith Development can provide materials.

Congregations should also support those laws that require store owners to display the fact that they sell pornographic materials, and that such materials be made separate and off limits to minors.

The effects of pornography on children is not the only concern. Since pornography by definition dehumanizes the persons portrayed in its material, we resist its presence. Pornography distorts not only the humanness of women, but perverts the nature of the male-female relation, the very image of God (Genesis 1:27). The church cannot, in the name of “rights,” defend those who produce that which engenders violence against persons, being careful to remember that the violence in question is not the offense caused the viewer or reader or listener. At the same time, pornography must be recognized as a symptom of a societal sickness, a phenomenon that cannot be eliminated simply by sophisticated laws or rigorous prosecution. Until the alienation between persons—the loss of the God-given intimacy in which we are made to be human—is overcome, pornography will find fertile soil in which to take root.

The church’s response must be twofold. First, the church is to conserve and proclaim the message that our true humanness is granted us in the community God makes with us. We place sexuality in the context of God’s community with his people. Second, the church continues its proclamation of the kingdom of God, a society aborning in Jesus Christ, a kingdom not yet fully present. Because we hope to image this new society in the midst of the old, we participate in public discussions of how we best shape our present society to reflect this kingdom. The new order will be one where we need not engage in violence to attain our aims. It will include a profound respect for persons. Thus it will presume, through gospel proclaimed and enacted, to eliminate the roots of pornography. And because we envision this kingdom as taking societal shape, the church can urge the encodement of kingdom possibilities in those laws that can, consistent with the protection of the human person, restrict the production and display of pornography.

The commission recognizes that there is no quick nor morally easy solution to the availability of pornography. We urge that our churches and their members enter the public discussion concerning the sorts of values we desire our culture to bear. We do so boldly, exposing those forces that make for victims even as we support a culture in which healthy sexual expression can be enjoyed fully within the covenant of persons given us by God.

**R-7.**

**To reissue the 1972 and 1978 reports entitled “Pornography,” “Human Sexuality: Biblical Perspectives,” and “Human Sexuality: Pornography in US Culture” for distribution to RCA congregations. (ADOPTED)**

**R-8.**

**To instruct the General Program Council to prepare an education packet for distribution to the churches that will include: (1) resources for education in human sexuality for adults and children, (2) resources on the nature of sexual pornography, and (3) resources that offer possibilities for local action. (ADOPTED)**

**R-9.**

**To encourage RCA congregations to educate their members on the topic of sexuality from a Christian perspective. (ADOPTED)**

**R-10.**

**To urge RCA congregations to express their disapproval of the production and distribution of pornography as defined in this statement, through the support of local laws that will curtail its presence. (ADOPTED)**

**R-11.**

**To urge RCA congregations to engage in local public discussion on the presence and nature of pornography, affirming the value of persons, and promoting an understanding of sexuality consistent with the Christian faith. (ADOPTED)**

**R-12.**

**To urge RCA congregations to express pastoral care to victims of pornography. (ADOPTED)**

**R-13.**

**To distribute this statement to RCA congregations. (ADOPTED)**