

A New Sexual Ethic

REV. DEBRA W. HAFFNER
CO-FOUNDER AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR,
RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE



Parents and religious leaders have a responsibility to help adolescents and young adults achieve moral, spiritual, and sexual health. Many religious traditions have promoted a sexual ethic that has been summarized as “chastity in singleness, fidelity in marriage.” There is a dramatic need for a new sexual ethic to guide people’s lives, one that does not focus on the morality of specific sexual acts but rather the quality of people’s relationships.

Premarital chastity is an ethic based in ancient biology and social morés. At the time that the Bible was written, people were married shortly after they reached puberty and died soon after their own children reached adulthood. The average life expectancy for women was only 25; many died in childbirth. Even at the turn of the 20th century, the goal of premarital chastity was reasonable: the average age of puberty was 17; the average age of marriage followed closely at 18. A year of “sexual unemployment” was not difficult to achieve.

Today, in stark contrast, young people reach puberty at an average age of 12 to 14; the average age of marriage is 25 to 27. Religious objections and a billion dollar federal abstinence only until marriage program notwithstanding, biology today has trumped convention. For at least the past forty years, nearly 90% of people have first

intercourse before their wedding night.

People are hungry for a new perspective on sexual morality, and it is time to offer moral advice beyond premarital chastity to adolescents and single adults. Many people of faith are seeking to understand how they can act morally and still embrace their sexuality. They want to be good and they want to be sexual. As a single man in his late twenties said to me, “I’ve been taught I can either embrace my sexuality or my religion. Not both. Can you help me?” A newly married 23-year-old Southern Baptist asked me, “Reverend Debra, my whole life I was taught that sex was a sin. Now I’m married, I’m supposed to forget all that and just enjoy myself. It’s killing me not to be able to do that with my husband.”

A new ethic for adolescent and young adult sexuality is urgently needed to replace premarital chastity as a single standard. Adults have a responsibility to help adolescents understand their evolving sexuality and to help them make responsible and healthy sexual choices, now and in their future.

More than fifteen years ago, I developed a framework for a moral sexual relationship. I believe, based on my more than thirty years as a sexuality educator and now as a minister, that a moral, ethical sexual relationship — whether one is married or single, 16 or 35 or 80, gay, bisexual, or straight — is defined by five criteria: it is consensual, non-exploitative, honest, mutually pleasurable, and protected, if any type of intercourse occurs. I teach adolescents and young adults to remember the five criteria by thinking the word CUHMP or by a mnemonic of the first letter of the five criteria, “Can U Have My Pleasure?” We go on to talk about that the five criteria need three conditions: communication between the partners, adequate time for the relationship to develop, and shared values. These

criteria are more ethically rigorous than abstinence until marriage because they apply to intimate relationships both before as well as after marriage.

Most parents, public health professionals, and religious leaders agree that most adolescents, especially those in high school or younger, are not ready for mature sexual relationships that include intercourse of any kind. The wisdom of religious traditions confirms that a moral sexuality demands self-understanding, respect, and self-discipline. Through education, counseling, support, and many hours of discussion, adults can help adolescents discern their emotional, physical, and spiritual readiness for mature intimate relationships.

But, it is past time for society to recognize most adolescents will become involved in sexual relationships during their teenage years. We must offer education, support, and services to those who are heterosexual and those who are sexual minorities; those who are abstinent and those who have sexual relationships; and those who have experienced abuse and exploitation. Rather than viewing adolescent and single young adult sexuality as needing adult controls, we must help them develop their own capacity for moral sexual decision-making, provide them with accurate information about sexuality, and model positive, healthy, and joyful attitudes about human sexuality in our own relationships.

The Reverend Debra W. Haffner is the co-founder and executive director of the Religious Institute. She is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. She is the endorsed community minister with the Unitarian Church in Westport, CT. Rev. Haffner was the chief executive officer of SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, from 1988 through May 2000. Prior to joining

RETHINKING RESPONSIBILITY

SIECUS, Rev. Haffner served as the Director of Education for the Center for Population Options, and the Director of Community Services for Planned Parenthood.