A better story: God, sex and human flourishing

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A BETTER STORY

GOD, SEX & HUMAN FLOURISHING

GLYNN HARRISON
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WHAT LIES AHEAD

Set in Ireland in the 1960s, the hit movie The Magdalene Sisters follows the fortunes of four young women incarcerated under a brutal regime of po-faced nuns running one of Ireland’s infamous Magdalene laundry asylums. Named after Mary Magdalene – who some people believed to have been a repentant prostitute – these laundry asylums for ‘fallen women’ operated across Europe and North America for the best part of 200 years.

The legal basis for putting women away like this was often painfully obscure. But regardless of legal niceties, the shameful spectre of raising a bastard child was usually enough to keep these women out of sight, and out of mind, sometimes for years on end. Many children were quietly removed and put up for adoption.¹

Surprisingly, the last laundry asylum in Ireland did not close until 1996. I say surprisingly because by the end of the twentieth century – in the Republic of Ireland as elsewhere – a cultural revolution of attitudes to sex and marriage was well under way. Things were changing so fast that, just a few
years later, Ireland would become the first country in the world to legalize same-sex marriage by popular vote. Over one-third of the country’s births would soon be taking place outside marriage.1 That figure would rise to nearly two-thirds in some parts of neighbouring Northern Ireland.1 The old conventions of holy matrimony were collapsing so fast that one opinion columnist (protesting against tax breaks for married couples) would ask, ‘Why should I subsidise other people’s weird lifestyle choices?’

Another recent film, The Imitation Game starring Benedict Cumberbatch, tells how the brilliant British mathematician and code-breaker Alan Turing was convicted of ‘gross indecency with a male’ in 1952. Offered a choice between going to prison and taking sex-suppressing hormones, Turing took the drugs. He died tragically of cyanide poisoning two years later.

Half a century later a Christian street preacher reportedly told a passer-by, as part of an exchange, that he believed homosexuality went against the Word of God.2 On this count he was bundled into the back of a police van by three uniformed officers and taken to a local police station. Police took fingerprints, a retinal scan and a DNA swab, and locked him up for several hours before charging him with a public order offence.

On Christmas Eve 2013 Turing was granted a royal pardon.

The events dramatized in the above-mentioned films, considered against their historical aftermath, portray something of the scale of the cultural upheaval we have come to call the sexual revolution. In the space of just a few decades the Christian moral vision, which had buttressed the ancient institutions of marriage and family for centuries, effectively collapsed. And most people today would think good riddance.

Living in the shadow of this great revolution, those Christians who still cling to the old Christian morality understandably feel overwhelmed. As if from nowhere, the home team suddenly feels like the away team. Worse, after witnessing the junking of their moral convictions, they find themselves cast as an immoral minority, a kind of enemy within. Most Christians no longer feel comfortable even admitting to their beliefs in the public square, let alone advocating them.

Against this backdrop, many Christian leaders, bishops and evangelists look like rabbits frozen in the headlights. Compared with efforts to defend their faith against the onslaught of the New Atheists, few have much to say about sex and marriage that is faintly inspiring or compelling. And when they do feel forced to publish some kind of official statement, it reads more like the terms and conditions of a software upgrade than a manifesto for human flourishing.

You have to sympathize with them. High-profile Christian leaders and evangelists don’t want their entire ministry hijacked by a slip of the tongue that brings down the wrath of the Twitter mob shouting ‘hate-filled!’ But if this is how the shepherds behave, think about how the sheep must feel. They smell their leaders’ fear. Confused and ashamed, some young evangelicals have already begun salami-slicing their convictions about the authority of the Bible. Others, like their leaders, are keeping their heads down, hoping and praying that the whole dreadful business will somehow go away. But it won’t. It just keeps on coming.

As if from nowhere, Christians whose views once occupied the mainstream of public morality suddenly feel weird. It’s worse than that: they feel guilty. Guilty for holding views held to be degrading to the human spirit. Guilty that they belong to a faith accused of heartlessly pushing the most
vulnerable and marginalized out into the cold. Guilty for having apparently heaped abuse on those whose only crime was being different. What happened to bring about such a paradigm shift? That is the question we are going to address in this book.

What lies in store

Before we get started, I need to say something about how much we can realistically cover. First, this book isn’t written to try to convince you about the authority of the Bible in determining the boundaries of Christian conduct and discipleship. I am going to assume that the majority of my readers hold relatively traditional (let’s call them ‘orthodox’) views on sex and marriage, but need help in relating them to the modern challenges of the revolution. If that isn’t you, I hope you will carry on reading anyway to see what this could look like.

What do I mean by ‘orthodox’ views? For our purposes, I use this term to summarize the following cluster of beliefs:

- God intended marriage as a lifelong commitment between one man and one woman.
- Marriage isn’t simply a human arrangement, but something sacred in God’s eyes.
- God himself joins a man and woman together as ‘one flesh’.
- This understanding prohibits all forms of sexual activity outside the marriage bond.

If you (more or less) hold to this moral stance, then for the remainder of this book I’ll call you an ‘orthodox Christian’. I am going to attempt to convince you, in the face of the challenges posed by the sexual revolution, that the Bible’s teaching is still good news. In fact, I want to aim higher. I want to persuade you that its teaching is life for the world and the only true foundation of human flourishing.

Even after narrowing its scope in this way, a book of this size can barely develop an adequate analysis of the questions, let alone supply all the answers. There isn’t room, for example, to excavate all the arguments about the social benefits of marriage as opposed to cohabitation. And we won’t be able to delve into the complex challenges of transgender and the other ‘hot-button’ issues served up on today’s smorgasbord of sexual identities. A little information can be dangerous. So I will try to highlight the key issues and then point you to resources that deal with them more adequately.

You will have seen from the Contents that this is a book of three parts. Part 1 tries to get to the bottom of why Christians are stumbling so badly, by making three core arguments.

First, I will contend that we are failing because we are not thinking. We haven’t grasped the ideological coherence of the revolution or mounted an effective intellectual engagement. When intellectuals talk about something oddly termed ‘queer theory’, for example, we look away with mild amusement. When activists make the social case for equality and civil liberty, we seem bent only on defending our own. Over and over we have failed to get to grips with the arguments that have made the vision of the revolution so plausible to so many ordinary people. We shall need to grapple with some difficult concepts in the early part of the book, but grapple we must. And I promise you, if you can stick with the earlier culture analysis, it gets easier as you go along!

Second, I will say that we have failed to grasp that the revolution has a positive moral vision of its own. Christians
expected to be able to portray their opponents as moral anarchists bent on depravity. Instead, their opponents cast them as the degenerates. Far from portraying a Dantesque nightmare of unfettered debauchery, the apologists of the revolution cast an inspirational vision of compassion and equality. How should Christians respond when people view them as being so bigoted and uncaring?

Third, we must grasp the central role that narrative played in helping to secure the revolution’s cultural dominance. The two films mentioned earlier are a wake-up call to the power of movie narratives in winning hearts and minds. We need to learn how narrative structures and formulas can be used to make a point of view appear more compelling and plausible. And then we must ask whether we have a story of our own to tell? And if so, what is it?

In part 2 we move on to consider how thoughtful, biblically minded Christians should react to these challenges and mount a more effective critique. Too often our incursions into public debate have sounded over-defensive, judgmental and out of touch. We answer questions that nobody is asking. How can we begin a critical engagement with the fallout of the revolution in a way that wins hearts and minds, and not just arguments?

In part 3 I will urge that it is time for Christians to regain our confidence, time to offer a better story of our own, a story told with conviction and vision. Let’s begin by being prepared to take some criticism on the chin. The revolution had some important lessons to teach us, and we should be prepared to say so. Our churches often cradled a sexual shame culture, and we should own up. We were so busy building our moral vision around what we were against – impurity, fornication, pornography and the rest – that we forgot to ask what we were actually for. We need to come clean about that. Then, and only then, will we be ready to rediscover a new narrative for a new generation.

A new ending

We can’t undo the past. Nobody can go back and start a new beginning. But anyone can start right now and make a new ending. That is the task that lies ahead. We must rediscover what Jesus’ promise of ‘life . . . to the full’ (John 10:10) looks like in relation to sex, singleness and marriage. And then we must begin to tell our own story, a story charged with hope, optimism and grace. A story told with inspiration and passion. A story told in words, yes, but also one put on display in our lives, real lives lived in real families and real communities.

Finally, let’s acknowledge the scale of the challenge before us. In today’s world the revival of a confident, biblically rooted vision of human flourishing in the sphere of sex and relationships looks like a pipe dream. Our culture seems so far adrift of its Christian foundations that it is almost impossible to imagine it. But imagine it we must. As I write in the shadow of Good Friday, I’m reminded that nothing looked more impossible than that Jesus would rise from the dead. Believers have been here before. Countless numbers paid the price for what they believed in, some with their lives. If we truly believe that what we have been given is life for the world, it is our turn now to stand up and be counted.
1 REVOLUTION IS MY NAME

How radical individualism went mainstream

So how did we get here? How come that over just a few decades Western society stopped heaping shame on single mums and started pondering whether marriage isn’t, after all, just another ‘weird lifestyle choice’? What powered the paradigm shift of values and lifestyle we now call the sexual revolution?

First, let me define how I use the term ‘sexual revolution’. I’m referring to the overturning and liberalization of long-established social and moral attitudes to sex that began in Western culture in the 1960s, and continues to the present day.

At the heart of this revolution sits the relaxation of the idea that sex is given for enjoyment within the commitments (including towards children) of marriage. But there has been a broader unravelling as well: sex is portrayed much more explicitly in literature and films; cohabitation has become the norm; attitudes to same-sex sex have been liberalized; pornography is mainstream; sadomasochism causes amusement rather than concern; and the idea of gender fluidity is
everywhere. Nevertheless, the core of the revolution is the severing of the link between sex and marriage that for centuries occupied the mainstream of Western culture.

What caused this great unravelling? We can take two broad approaches to understanding what happened. The first is to explore changes in economic and social circumstances that were in play over this period. For example, putting the economic case, the retreat from marriage can be linked with the introduction of generous welfare benefits in the wake of growing post-war prosperity. This undermined the need for traditional male 'breadwinners' and created a raft of new opportunities for women. Progressive de-industrialization and the rise of service industries also multiplied employment possibilities for women. And campaigns for the equalization of income between the sexes put yet more strain on the traditional roles that had shored up the institution of marriage. Women just didn't need men any more. Or, at least, they no longer needed them in the same way.

Other social and cultural developments built upon these changes. Second-wave feminism raised women's expectations of equality and sexual satisfaction further. Divorce laws were liberalized and, as more children were being successfully cared for in non-traditional relationships, couples lost the motivation to stick together for the sake of the kids. The collective outcome of these changes (as welcome as many of them were) was a weakening of the link between sex and marriage, and the unravelling of the idea of marriage as an institution founded on a 'for-better-for-worse' commitment of permanence.

The final nail in the coffin of traditional marriage was almost certainly the introduction of safe, reliable contraception. At a stroke, sex was uncoupled from childbearing and all the responsibilities that go with it. People's bodies were their own, and they were free to do with them as they wished.

Ideas that change the world

Besides these social and economic changes, an alternative approach to understanding the sexual revolution is to explore the influence of new ideas that were catching on at the time, especially new forms of individualism. What exactly is individualism? It's about the weight we attach to individual thought and action relative to the importance of authorities and traditional institutions. In other words, individualism is about the value of thinking for yourself versus what you are being told by other people. It's also something to do with the uniqueness of the individual, their rights and their individual value.

So there's much to celebrate in individualism. Many of today's civic freedoms and privileges are rooted in new ideas about the authority and the power of the individual that arose during the European Enlightenment of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It's good to think for yourself. The Christian doctrine that men and women are created equally and uniquely in God's image underpins this and all responsible forms of individualism. God cares about the individual, especially those who suffer oppression and injustice, and he calls us to fight on their behalf.

So what was so different about the 1960s? Previously, individualism had been about striking the right balance between individual thought and reason on the one hand, and external authority and the wisdom of tradition on the other. Now it was about freedom from external authority and the wisdom of tradition - all of it. The balance tilted decisively in favor of the individual, and with wide-ranging consequences. Freedom was about being freed from the moral and ethical obligations imposed by others. It was about being freed from big business and religious institutions. Perhaps most radically
of all, it was about being freed from nature itself. It didn’t matter that we did not yet know how to make these claims happen; it was simply enough to assert them. And if reality wouldn’t fall in line quickly enough, then we would redefine reality itself.

Welcome to the world of radical individualism. Before digging into this idea further, however, let’s return to the cultural context of the 1960s to see how this new thinking took hold.

The times they were a-changin’

Bob Dylan’s iconic anthem of the 1960s: “The Times They Are A-Changin” pretty much summed up the spirit of the age. The times were indeed changing, and fast. Dylan’s celebration of change told parents that their children were now out of reach and ‘beyond their command’. And if they couldn’t lend them a hand, they needed to get out of their way because... the times they were ‘a-changin’.

But what kind of change exactly? Actually, nobody knew. It was pretty much change for change’s sake, as Dylan’s critics point out. At the time of writing, well into his seventies, Dylan still occasionally performs that song. But when an elderly grandfather sings, ‘Your sons and your daughters are beyond your command’, what does that mean for today? Back in the sixties it meant telling square people to accept the fact that their children were hippies. But today it could mean ex-hippie old men like Dylan accepting that their children have become bankers or city lawyers. Or arms dealers or terrorists. And why not? Shorn of a moral vision beyond change for change’s sake, like Joseph and His Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, pretty much any dream will do.

The dream of the Big Me

It turned out that any dream would do, provided it was my dream. The authority of the individual and the primacy of thinking for yourself were taken to a whole new level. ‘Freedom!’ was the watchword. Freedom from authority. Freedom from ‘nature’. Freedom to be me – whoever ‘me’ happens to be, or wants to be.

What happened to wake up this dormant giant of a philosophy and embed it so powerfully in the popular imagination? Several cultural factors were in play over this time. First, there was the growing popularity and cultural penetration of TV, films and popular music. Enthused by what I was seeing on TV in the early sixties, for example, I remember deciding that it was time for a James Dean-style quiff/pompadour makeover. Soon afterwards, inspired by ‘Fonzie’ from Happy Days, I moved on to the hideous duck’s tail. And then, before the hairspray had a chance to dry, the whole thing had to be dismantled and swept forward into a Beatle-style haircut.

It was all about being different. We didn’t want to distinguish ourselves from one another, of course. That was part of the irony, because we all ended up looking the same. But we wanted to be different from them – the representatives of conformity (teachers, vicars and the like) who told us what was allowed and what wasn’t and what was normal and what wasn’t. Well, to hell with all that because we were experiencing the first intoxicating flush of the freedom to be ourselves. Or at least that is what we thought.

But TV, pop stars and the movies didn’t simply furnish young people with trendy new role models. They were the co-opted handmaidens of burgeoning post-war consumerism. This was an era of growing prosperity, and much of the new money was heading into the pockets of working-class kids.
like me. Our sheer weight of numbers provided a vast new marketplace for the Mad Men of advertising: motorcycles and cars, clothes and accessories, hairstyles and gadgets... it looked like everything was being designed especially for us.

Author Steve Gillon comments, 'Almost from the time they were conceived, Boomers were dissected, analysed, and pitched to by modern marketeers who reinforced their sense of generational distinctiveness.'

These marketeers made us feel different, original and new. Most of all, they told us we were special. Little surprise then that in the slipstream of media-driven consumerism, the 1960s witnessed the birth of the self-esteem movement and the growth of pop psychology. As I showed in The Big Ego Trip, the spin doctors of pop psychology assured us that boosting self-esteem would revolutionize well-being, help kids do better at school, and buttress against addiction and substance misuse. It didn't just make you feel good, they said, it made you good – a better person. And psychology proved it. Thus, media-driven consumerism and the penetration of self-esteem ideology became the twin foundations supporting the dream of the Big Me.

With various twists and turns, over the next five decades this shifting perspective towards the individual strengthened its grip. In 2006 the respected UK Henley Centre for Forecasting reported findings from a tracking poll that had been posing the same set of questions for over twenty years. Each year the pollsters asked, 'Do you think the quality of life in the UK is best improved by (a) looking after the community’s interests instead of our own or (b) looking after ourselves, which ultimately raises standards for all?' Before the year 2000, the majority had chosen (a), that is, most people thought that the best way to improve the quality of life for everybody was to put other people's interests ahead of their own. With the dawn of a new millennium, however, the gap had closed. Now, a majority of those interviewed chose option (b) instead. For the first time in the history of the poll the majority of people believed in looking after 'me' first. It was this cultural transition from we to me, driven by the ideologies of radical individualism, that fomented the shifts in thought and behaviour we now call the sexual revolution.

In sum

To summarize, we began by referencing the economic and social changes (for example, the introduction of welfare benefits and the relaxation of divorce laws) that underpinned the revolution, before exploring the new ideology of self that drove it forward. But there are two important caveats. First, it needn't be an 'either/or' battle between these two approaches. Both perspectives are needed. In fact, they interact: our beliefs and convictions, our dreams and our imaginings build up and tear down social networks and institutions on the one hand, just as these structures mould and shape our thinking and imagining on the other hand.

Human minds, and the culture they inhabit, co-create each other in a continuous loop of dynamic interaction. Culture and the psyche ‘make each other up’.

Second, we need to re-emphasize the many positive benefits of individualism. The fight against inequality was energized by the tilt towards the individual. It gave a generation of women being subjected to psychological or physical abuse the courage to get out from under the vice-like grip of their husband’s control. It brought women's skills and gifts into the world of commerce and governance. Everywhere, the little people – sexually abused, discriminated against, downtrodden by establishment elites – found the courage to
stand up and fight for their rights. Wherever we come across the defeat of injustice and unfairness, Christians should be among the first to celebrate, because this reflects the heart of God himself.

But this brief chapter hasn’t been about those forms of individualism that seek to strike a balance between the rights and responsibilities of the individual on the one hand, and the role of external authorities and the wisdom of tradition on the other. It has been about radical individualism’s bid for freedom from all authority and tradition. It has been about the sovereignty of the individual.

Nowhere is this more noticeable today than in the sphere of identity and gender ideology. So in the next chapter we dig further into the big ideas that powered the revolution. I will explore how, in its bid for sovereignty, the self claimed the ultimate freedom – the freedom to define itself.

Key ideas in this chapter

- The sexual revolution refers to the overturning and liberalization of long-established social and moral attitudes to sex and marriage. It began in the 1960s and continues to the present day.
- Big social and cultural changes brought about by post-war prosperity and radical new forms of individualism interacted (‘culture and psyche make each other up’) to give birth to this revolution and then drive it forward.
- The general concept of individualism (the value and responsibility of each individual person) is grounded in Christian tradition. Provided it remains anchored in broader values of community and mutuality, individualism benefits human well-being and flourishing.

- Today’s radical individualism, however, heightens the sovereignty of the individual over all other sources of authority. This has shifted our culture in favour of individualistic approaches to a wide range of issues, with far-reaching changes to how we think about morality and human identity.