

Wilderness Reflections - 8 - Meaning and Purpose of Life and Human Sexuality

Gay or Redeemed – Sexuality, Discrimination, & Language

Anyone under 30 years of age may not know the word gay to have any meaning other than to indicate people identifying themselves as homosexual – referring to the object of their erotic desires, their lifestyle, their sexual practices, associated values or anti-values, or all of the above – a reduction apparently accomplished by 1960's American society. We have of late been witnessing far more radical changes at many levels in western society around this word gay and varying degrees of militancy that are being shown by people who are motivated to engineer, accelerate, enable, assist, or at least favor such changes.

Webster's New World Dictionary (1977 edition) has the following meanings of the word gay: "1. joyous and lively; merry 2. bright, brilliant [gay colors] 3. given to social pleasures [a gay life] 4. wanton, licentious [a gay dog] 5. [Slang] homosexual". The editors qualify as slang using the word gay to identify a person as homosexual, which is to say it is a new and increasingly common usage that did not previously exist, having little to do with previous usage, and which may actually hinder the continued use of the word as it had hitherto been understood.

At the time that using the word gay to designate things homosexual was considered a slang usage of the word, people generally would spontaneously discriminate things homosexual as morally wrong. With or without formal education, people saw homosexuality as either unnatural or immoral or both. Somewhere around 1985 the official American dictionary of medical disorders removed homosexuality; thereby no longer considering it a disorder. This became a powerful lever employed by what we could call the "gay lobby" to pry public opinion towards a clean break with human history and even with the dictates of conscience.

Here we run into a similar linguistic problem with the word discriminate. It too has been reduced in popular understanding and usage to only one of the several meanings it too enjoyed for centuries, as shown in Webster's: "(vt. – which means verb transitive, or followed by a noun as object) 1. to constitute a difference between; differentiate 2. to recognize the difference between; distinguish – (vi. – verb intransitive, or not followed by a noun as object) 1. to see the difference (between things); distinguish 2. to be discerning 3. to show partiality (in favor of) or prejudice (against) – (adj. – an adjective to give more particular and specific meaning to a noun) distinguishing carefully".

At present, the word discriminate is almost exclusively used and understood to indicate the showing of prejudice. In the latter half of the 20th century, human rights groups have made such heavy use of the word in order to condemn prejudicial practices, and the word has become so heavy with condemnatory associations, that it is almost impossible to use it to designate the very human and essential practice of identifying differences.

Is it merely a coincidence that this society has developed a value system around another word – tolerance – that ironically is simultaneously accompanied by intolerance of the very act of identifying differences, whether these be differences in social and ethnic background among people, or differences in moral or other forms of values? By definition, a society that chooses no longer to identify differences simultaneously undermines the principle upon which it has previously legislated boundaries around its fundamental values; so as to separate order from chaos – with corresponding rewards for orderly behavior and punishments for disorderly behavior.

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Almost throughout human history, most societies were, to varying degrees, closed – that is, having a clear sense of values, with commonly known laws enshrining these values, and effectively mobilized in the implementation of these values: distributing rewards and imposing punishments. Of course, the normal tension existing between older and younger generations causes variations in the degree of conviction, effectiveness and enthusiasm with which such laws are applied.

Western society was quite closed until World War I. All those involved in the atrocities suffered varying degrees of upset in their personal conscience and in their identification with the standards and taboos of their society. Still, western society continued to remain fairly closed until the upheaval of the Second World War, which meant that most people still had a strong sense of belonging to a family, a people, a nation, and a religion.

Their sense of identity was inculcated in them as children by their parents and extended family, by their school, church and other social institutions, and even by neighbors. Children grew to mature, responsible members of their society by understanding and making their own a code of acceptable and appropriate behaviors and consenting to the enforcement of various sanctions designed to punish misbehavior and reinforce their society's values.

The 20th century brought about a deep revolution in views and values. In addition to the two world wars, an important factor was the popularization of psychological theories and their related therapeutic practices. The independence from absolute truth and its related values declared and seized by the philosophers of the European Enlightenment finally made its way to the masses in the 20th century – it is called subjectivism – which Webster's defines in this way: "subjective – adj. 1. of or resulting from the feelings of the subject, or person thinking; not objective; personal [a subjective opinion] 2. determined by and emphasizing the ideas, feelings, etc. of the artist or writer 3. Gram. same as nominative 4. Med. designating or of a symptom perceptible only to the patient."

As I write and as you read this, men/women now claim to be the exclusive subject or artisan of their personal identity, meaning, purpose, and even nature; thereby rejecting any source for defining or understanding ourselves from outside, from God or any other objective reference point. I decide myself who I am, what my life means to me, why I am here, and even what I am.

This is also secularism, which Webster's defines thus: "n. (a noun) 1. worldly spirit, views, etc.; esp., a system of beliefs and practices that rejects any form of religious faith 2. the belief that religion should be strictly separated from the state or government, esp. from public education."

As people read an article like this, I expect to observe any number of subjective responses; that is, reactions at the level of personal feelings and thoughts. Will anyone be willing to respond to the issues themselves, dispassionately? Because the intent has been to try to make some distinctions in order to better understand the social and moral changes that are happening and better situate ourselves with regards to such changes, there will be those who will object to the simple fact of making any distinctions.

Then there will be those who will want to discredit or dismiss much if not all that has been done in societies previous to our own to identify homosexuality as outside the parameters or boundaries of acceptable human behavior – whether such distinction has been made on philosophical, religious, cultural or psychological grounds.

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Those who will claim to be purists in the use of the human sciences will dismiss as insignificant all that pertains to the human spirit or soul, including all that relates to morality or religion, since in their view nothing that pertains to the spirit or soul can be scientifically observed, analyzed, proven, demonstrated or quantified. For those who hold this view, God does not exist; so it follows that all principles or declarations claiming to be from God are for them irrelevant.

They will further dismiss the work of any scientists, including psychologists, who have attempted to posit the validity of the human spirit or soul and of God as legitimate sources of observations about the reality of human life and who subsequently attempt to form God or from the human spirit principles that might regulate human life, both in its origins and in its destiny. In effect, these scientists attempt to bridge the gap between the pure and applied sciences and human sciences such as biology, physics, chemistry, biochemistry, medicine, archeology, psychology and sociology on the one hand, and the more interpretive and systematic disciplines of study such as philosophy, theology, and anthropology on the other hand.

To simply dismiss the latter disciplines in favor of the former and discount dialogue between them is, at least in effect if not by intent, somewhat arrogant. It's like bluntly saying that only pure and applied scientists have anything relevant to say about the human person, our origin and our destiny, what human behavior constitutes or builds up the human person and society, and what human behavior debilitates or breaks down the human person and society. It's like saying that no person, no society that has ever lived, thought, valued and promoted human life before the advent of the primacy of the exact sciences has anything valid to say about human life.

Such a stance unilaterally, if not openly, reduces the nature of the human person only to what relates to the body, the brain, and the emotions and can therefore be observed, studied, quantified, and regulated. It dismisses all that relates to the human spirit or soul as random, unpredictable impulses or personal preferences, albeit allowing that these can find similarities in other people – hence the emergence of religious and other behaviors – but discounting them as accidental phenomena, without organizing principles or laws that can be scientifically observed and quantified.

Since before the Enlightenment, the realms of philosophy, religion, and faith were seen as the domain of religious authorities, and those wanting to be free of these authorities – free to define on their own terms what constitutes human morality – have sought ways to dismiss these authorities by trivializing or simply rejecting their sources of legitimacy and foundations. The human sciences in the 20th century together undermined the legitimacy of principles supporting the authority of philosophy, religion, and faith.

All the current discourses about human sexuality, the nature of the human person, and human dignity are not casual chats or arguments but radical reflections with profound, very grave, and long lasting consequences for all of humanity and each individual person on the planet. It is unacceptable that the debate be driven only by what anyone thinks, feels, wants, or demands. As G. K. Chesterton would have said, we cannot hand over our human destiny to a dictatorship of those who just happen to be alive and able to express themselves. Previous generations had their word to say and these views continue to have value if only for the reason that they remain part of our heritage. In addition, since a large proportion of humanity believe in a Creator God and afterlife, this order of considerations must also be allowed its rightful place at the table.