

## CENSORSHIP OR EDUCATION? 439

### FEMINIST VIEWS ON PORNOGRAPHY

Mary Ellen Ross

*Mary Ellen Ross, an assistant professor of religion at Trinity University, discusses the disagreements which have developed within religious groups and within feminist groups in America over the issue of censorship of pornography. As Ross observes, Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants tend to favor censorship, while mainline Protestants tend to favor combating pornography with education and "consciousness-raising." A similar schism exists within feminist groups, as Ross demonstrates in her summary of the arguments of feminist supporters and critics of the controversial 1984 Indianapolis Anti-Pornography Ordinance (which was later struck down by the U. S. Court of Appeals). Ross finally sides with those who favor education over censorship and suggests forms such an approach to the problem may take.*

Pornographic images have been proliferating at a remarkable rate. What was a \$5 million-a-year enterprise merely 25 years ago has boomed to a \$7 billion to \$10 billion-a-year industry today. Pornography turns a larger profit than the conventional film and music industries combined. This surge is due in part to the discovery of new markets. While adult bookstores, peepshows and movie theaters still thrive, the fastest growing sectors of the industry are pornographic video cassettes, cable television, and phone sex. Pornography is no longer confined to the seedier sections of town. It is readily available to all, including children, and in the privacy of our own homes. It reflects not only the increasing privatization and fragmentation of our culture, but also our ambivalence about sexuality.

To the religious, no images are neutral. Liberal and conservative churches have sought to reverse the proliferation of explicit and degrading depictions of human sexuality. But their approaches have varied considerably. Groups on the religious right have focused on the sexually explicit and sexually arousing characteristics of pornography, which they denounce as obscene. The Catholic Church, drawing on natural law theology, has condemned pornography as undermining human dignity and subverting the common social good. In its most recent resolution on the subject, the Episcopal Church declared in July 1988 that hard-core pornography abuses the self-images of women, children and men, and urged congregations to support then-Attorney General Edwin Meese's report with its call for stricter and tougher enforcement of already existing laws against pornography.

Some denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the United Methodist Church, have expressed special outrage over child pornography and have also called for telephone and television companies to do more to restrict access to pornographic materials. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), in an exhaustive and exemplary report on the subject in June 1988 ("Pornography: Far from 'The Song of Songs'"), condemned the

proliferation of sexually explicit materials that demean men and women. Unlike religious right groups and the Catholic Church, which insist that freedom of expression is not absolute and that human dignity is a greater good than the right of the pornographers to freedom of speech, the mainline Protestant churches have shied away from efforts to restrict expression, tending to recommend that church members register their objections with distributors of pornographic material (boycotting them, if necessary) and stressing the importance of education. Both mainline Protestant and Catholic churches have been addressing the degradation of human sexuality and especially of women that pornography entails rather than emphasizing as the religious right groups do the inherent objectionableness of sexually explicit and sexually stimulating material.

The traditional definition of pornography—material that is sexually arousing or appeals to prurient interests—is no longer satisfactory. The critical feature of all pornography is not that it deals with sexual themes, but that it eroticizes violence, humiliation, degradation and other explicit forms of abuse. Churches disagree widely over how we might best cope with the rapid and relentless growth of the pornography industry. One possibility, suggested by religious right groups and the Catholics, is censorship. The mainline Protestant churches, by contrast, have urged education and consciousness-raising.

The debate over the appropriate response to pornography is not limited to the churches. Since women are the most frequent victims of pornography, feminists, too, have debated how to respond to it. The churches can learn from their discussions.

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The objection that much of pornography is demeaning to women surfaced early in the contemporary feminist movement, particularly in Kate Miller's 1970 book *Sexual Politics*, which analyzed some of Henry Miller's limited and negative portrayals of women. The anti-pornography fight gained its greatest momentum in 1975 with the appearance of "snuff" films in the U.S. Claiming to depict the actual killing and dismembering of female actors during explicitly sexual scenes, these films highlighted the link between sex and violence that frequently characterizes pornography. The anti-pornography movement that flourished in this climate reached its most stringent form when feminist activists Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinnon drafted the Indianapolis Anti-Pornography Ordinance in 1984.

This ordinance defined pornography as anything that presents women as sexual objects, as enjoying pain, humiliation or rape, or as being physically harmed. It also identified as pornography material that depicts women in "scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, or torture" and as "filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual." Underlying the ordinance is the assumption that pornography plays an important role in causing rape and domestic violence, and therefore is not only demeaning but constitutes an overt physical threat to women. The ordinance would have permitted any woman who felt degraded or victimized by a piece of pornographic literature or pornographic film to have a court injunction issued against the booksellers, theater owners, publishers and distributors to prevent the marketing of the offending material. The ordinance, which the city government passed and the mayor approved, was opposed by a group

of book publishers, distributors and sellers. The resulting court case (*Hudnut v. the American Booksellers Association*) went as far as the U.S. Court of Appeals, which ruled in favor of the booksellers. The U.S. Supreme Court, by refusing to review the case, confirmed the lower court's decision. But both Mackinnon and Dworkin have stated they will continue their campaign against pornography through all available channels. Thus the Indianapolis ordinance remains a live issue.

The efforts of Mackinnon and Dworkin have helped us recognize the inadequacy of the "sexual arousal" definitions of pornography; they have made us aware of the profound misogyny in pornography, and revealed how extensive pornographic images are in our culture. Because it called for a form of censorship, however, the Indianapolis ordinance raised a red flag before publishing houses and a number of feminists. One such group of feminists fears that the censoring of sexually explicit materials would violate the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech and backfire on women by permitting the censorship of feminist speech. Some lesbians have objected to the ordinance out of fear that it would serve to permit certain expressions of sexuality and discourage others. Eventually, the discomfort over the Indianapolis ordinance gave birth to FACT (Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce), which filed an *amicus curiae* brief with the court on behalf of the book publishers opposed to the ordinance.

FACT argued that the ordinance reinforced the prevailing prejudices that women are not interested in sexual expression, that sexually explicit materials are degrading to women, and that women cannot make choices about sexual matters for themselves but need the paternalistic protection of the law. We do not have to look far for examples of these assumptions, FACT contended; for example, a number of states until recently restricted the circulation of birth-control information on the grounds that it fostered immorality and undermined the family, and statutory rape laws still assume that young men are responsible for their sexual behavior and young women are not.

FACT argued that very little social-scientific evidence substantiates the assertion that pornography causes violence. Misogynist images exist everywhere in our society, it noted; we cannot possibly control all of them. It pointed out that violence itself is the problem, not just violence linked to sex. Therefore, to be consistent, the ordinance should have tried to censor all displays of violence.

FACT claimed that the Indianapolis ordinance perpetuated gender stereotypes by implying that women are helpless victims who don't enjoy sex and that men cannot control their sexual urges and can be incited to violent action by the mere sight of pornography. These stereotypes are precisely what feminists should be fighting, FACT insisted.

Finally, FACT argued that the ordinance could not be effective because sexual meanings are generally determined in relation to a context, and because sexual messages are notoriously complex and ambiguous. For instance, feminists disagree on the interpretation of *Swept Away*, a Lina Wertmüller film that portrays an upper-class woman who is sexually dominated by her servant and who eventually begins to enjoy the domination. Some feminists find this theme objectionable, whereas other feminists find illuminating the movie's exhaustive examination of a relation-



ship of domination and submission. Terms in the ordinance such as "sex object" and "subordination" are vague, FACT asserted, and could be interpreted in a number of ways.

In essence, FACT has called for the protection of sexually explicit speech. It argues that an author could portray, for example, a rape scene—even a scene in which a woman enjoys rape—in constructing a story that it ultimately and thoroughly feminist. It believes that the stifling of erotic imagery would ultimately deter the feminist imaginations and voices that strive to remove female sexuality from patriarchal control.

The FACT brief reveals that censorship creates far more difficulties than it solves. And yet the problem remains: women's bodies are used to sell everything from whiskey to tractor parts; heavy-metal rock-and-roll bands sing songs glorifying sexual violence; and hard-core pornography depicts virtually every form of torture and mutilation imaginable. The FACT stance seems to downplay the fact that as members of our society none of us avoids being affected by prevailing images. While it may be impossible to prove that a particular pornographic image or text has actually caused a rape, the proliferation of such images certainly helps create a climate in which rape gains a certain level of acceptability. (By portraying gang rape as entertainment *Hustler* diminishes for its readers some of the horror of this crime.) FACT appears to support the call to assert one's autonomy from cultural images, but its assumption that we are completely unaffected by cultural images is as incorrect as assuming, with Dworkin and MacKinnon, that we are completely at the mercy of such images. Therefore, while I share FACT's opposition to censorship, I nonetheless believe we must recognize pornography's destructive influence, and that it runs counter to the foundational Christian feminist understanding that men and women are created equal and that both sexes were made in the image of God. Christians and feminists believe that pornography calls for concrete response.

Action against pornography can take many forms and still steer clear of censorship. It is certainly appropriate for churches to boycott and demonstrate against objectionable films and images. Churches can urge phone companies and video stores to make it difficult for minors to use phone sex and X-rated films. They can lobby for restrictive zoning to curtail the spread of pornography into residential areas. All congregations should support rape crisis centers and battered women's shelters that assist the ultimate victims of our pornography-ridden society.

I would warn Christian feminists that it would be a strategic mistake to forge an alliance with groups on the religious or political right simply because they, too, oppose pornography. Although they have used feminist language at times, their opposition to pornography stems much more from their nostalgia for a "purer" America, and they disagree with feminists on crucial issues such as sex education and day care.

My own experience suggests that the most effective means of attacking pornography is education. In ethics classes, in which most of the students are in their first or second year of college, I first show (after giving advance warning and making it clear that attendance is optional) the Canadian Film Board's documentary *Not a Love Story*, which portrays some of the most violent and degrading pornography available. I show the film not for its shock value but to alert my students to the extremes of misogyny represented in the pornography industry. Before seeing the

film, most of my students define pornography as material that is merely sexually explicit. Afterward they find this equation questionable. After viewing and discussing the film, we analyze images from a much milder source, *Playboy* magazine. Again, almost all the students have considered the pictures in *Playboy* objectionable only because of the nudity. But once they have examined the models' poses, the contexts in which the models appear and the overall format of the magazine, they recognize that pornography does in fact degrade women, that it invariably shows women and not men in positions of submission and weakness. I conclude by having the class scrutinize images in advertising, fiction, the conventional film industry and other conventional media for more subtle portrayals of pornographic themes. My students' remarks suggest that as a result of this analysis they are less likely to become consumers of pornography or of products that are advertised with pornographic themes. Churches may wish to follow this approach.

To construct a precise and effective critique of pornography, we must also have a clear idea of what we consider normative sexual expression. Unfortunately, throughout much of its history the church's views of sexuality have differed little from those of contemporary pornographers. Many Christian thinkers have expressed contempt for human physicality and for women, a contempt that pornographers clearly share. But Christianity contains more positive attitudes as well, including biblical affirmations of the human body—evident in the creation story, the concept of the incarnation and the Roman Catholic notion of the unitive purposes of sexuality. This social and communal understanding of erotic life is totally absent in the privatized world of pornography. Churches, in their teachings about sexuality, must resist the isolation and fragmentation that pornography represents. A sound theology of the body must not only celebrate male and female physicality but also acknowledge that sexuality is meant to help unite individuals, and ultimately communities.