W. A. Wood

SEX AND MORALITY

A present member and former Deacon of the Congregational Church discusses the report of a Working Party of the British Council of Churches.

THE UPSURGE of new writing about what some people call the 'Sexual Revolution' has yielded at least one very fine booklet, Sex and Morality, a report presented to the British Council of Churches.

This is a Protestant body, so its pamphlet doesn't deal with the world-wide controversy shaking the Roman Catholic Church over the use of the contraceptive pill. But its arguments will reinforce those trying to bring the Catholic hierarchy down on the side of the humanist approach.

The Australian press widely publicised and, on the whole, welcomed Sex and Morality when it was published last year, without apparently realising its implications as to the non-religious basis of ethical judgments. We can be sure that if these were missed on earth, they will not have escaped the notices of Heaven, which can seldom have been treated with such scant ceremony by religious people.

The growing, and highly welcome, dialogue between Christians and marxists has been conspicuous from the start for the courageous willingness of the Christian side to modify positions which have been thought by many people, Christian and non-Christian, to be basic to them. This movement in recent times has been led by the Bishop of Woolwich, whose book Honest to God showed a willingness to depart from the conception of God as a supreme personal ruler. And, last year, there came to Australia the beautiful, smiling Mother Gorman with her cheerful formula, God = X ('if you like').

For the authors of the Council of Churches pamphlet, God certainly seems to exist as a person, but a person with modern ideas whose wishes, or commandments, it would be a pleasure to carry out since he wants for us nothing that we would not want for ourselves. Turning these pages we get scarcely a glimpse of the elderly bachelor of uncertain temper, who, if he thought some-
body's moral conduct was open to criticism, had a way of saying so with thunderbolts; who thought nothing of annihilating whole populations on account of sexual and other deviations. The new pamphlet boldly suggests that God "wisely adjusts his requirements to our changing needs". It rejects the "dualism in which the interests of the body inevitably conflict with those of the spirit. This dualistic view, which has powerfully influenced Christianity in the past, is now seen to have no warrant in the Old Testament or in the Gospels; it is therefore natural to emphasise the value of the body as God's creation and as good in its own right".

Having given us these bodies and no doubt being proud of it, the God of the new pamphlet is yet able modestly to refrain from claiming any exclusive say as to how we should use them. There is bound to be a conflict between Christians and non-Christians on the formal definition of morality, says the pamphlet. However, this conflict need not necessarily extend to the content of morality. Christians believe in a God who is personal and loving and who wills for each man and woman the most enduring and complete happiness of which they are capable. But many humanists also take as their fundamental axiom the promotion of human happiness, and it may be that their ideal of human happiness coincides more or less closely with the Christian one.

It follows that a non-Christian is as likely as a Christian to contribute ideas useful to the promotion of happiness.

The Ten Commandments had a mixed reception from the audience to which they were addressed, both immediately and through the centuries. But about a proposed eleventh, which emerges from this new book with the same imperative force as the earlier ten did from Sinai, there will be few if any complaints. Making the essential point that the "coital relationship is not a separate entity but is the final expression of the whole marriage relationship", the book says:

Those relational acts of coitus between husband and wife which cement and deepen their love... such coitus is directly beneficial to the whole family. It cannot too strongly be stressed that the well-being of the family depends to a greater extent than has perhaps been realised hitherto on the well-being of one flesh—and, to that well-being, regular coitus makes a profound contribution.

Not the decrees of God but the welfare of man is the standpoint from which these authors answer every query about sexual conduct. Even from this standpoint, they are elastic both in formulating rules and in suggesting what the rules, if any, should mean. Out of the window goes St. Thomas Aquinas with his immutable 'Natural Law'. In comes Aristotle, with his verdict that 'morality can never be an exact science'.

It follows that, while believing in marriage and in sex within marriage, the pamphlet authors are not prepared to say that, before or outside marriage, it is invariably and absolutely wrong-
Further, if casual, extra-marital sex is wrong, it is wrong because of its effect on humans and human welfare—not because of anything Moses said:

People can, of course, have sexual experience which is trivially pleasurable or mildly therapeutic; no heaven or hell about it. But it is the nature of the experience that you don't know which it is going to be, for yourself or the other person... what is an agreeable recreation for one may be a consuming fire for the other.

The different meanings it may have for the two sexes is also stressed; the advent of the liberating 'pill' has failed to redress the balance of risk to the emotional stability of the partners. Biological processes, the working party claims, condition a woman not simply for the act of intercourse but for the adaptation of a large part of her life towards child-bearing whether a child is expected or planned at any single act of intercourse or not.

For many women the act of intercourse has its chief significance in her readiness to become the mother of her partner's child.

A woman's responses are "less quickly aroused" but "even more tenacious and forward looking" than a man's, says the pamphlet.

Also to be thought of is the welfare of a possible third party to the transaction. The pamphlet has not overmuch respect for Moses' commandments but heartily stresses two of Dr. Alex Comfort's: "Thou shalt not exploit another person's feelings and wantonly expose them to an experience of rejection" and "Thou shalt not negligently risk producing an unborn child".

The pamphlet views divorce from the same humanist standpoint. In effect, marriage was made for the benefit of humans, not the other way round. "Marriage is primarily about human relationships... it is at the service of love." When love has ended—not merely erotic emotion but all feeling of companionship and belonging—then marriage has in effect ended and "can decently be terminated... No principle is maintained by refusal to concede that the marriage, as a marriage, no longer exists". Further, a second marriage should not only be allowed; it can be encouraged, because, if successful, it may make amends for the errors of the first.

From the same standpoint also the pamphlet deals with abortion which the committee would like to see "freed from many of the present legal restrictions". It does not have a section on homosexuality but a similarly humane approach to this problem seems to be implied in its recommendation that the Government "bring the law affecting sexual conduct into line with informed contemporary opinion".

The committee writing the pamphlet agrees that it may be "out of step with the main body of Christian judgment" in refusing
to say that "chastity consists in obedience to an invariable rule which forbids sexual intercourse outside marriage". In justification for thus having jettisoned the Law and most of the Prophets the committee effectively replies:

We have not said that all rules are valueless. We have tried to show that rules by themselves are an inadequate basis for morality. No rule can cover all the varied and complex situations in which men and women find themselves.

If the pamphlet's humanist outlook, already endorsed and acted on by the community at large, is accepted also by the churches, thus making it unanimous, what is the future for monogamous marriage as an institution? So far it has been preserved with the powerful aid of a squad of dragons guarding the portals of illicit and extramarital sex.

One of these, the threat of venereal disease, has been slain or greatly weakened by modern medical science; another, the fear of unwanted children by the one and only pill. A third, the social stigma attached to it by ironclad moralists mainly entrenched within the established churches, is now beginning to look distinctly sick and seedy under the assaults of such people as the British Council of Churches Working Committee, authors of this booklet.

If, in these circumstances, marriage remains 'popular', as the Committee says it now is, the reason can only be that people have chosen it because it ministers to their lasting happiness—not because they have been scared or lured into it for any other motive. And that should be the main concern of all who read this pamphlet, in which the humanist will find everything he wants except the formal renunciation of the boasted tie between morality and religion.

But the socialist may ask, with due respect, for something more. He may feel inclined to ask the Working Committee whether Engels' *Origin of the Family* is not still as correct as when published in 1877—in finding the main reason for loveless marriages (and hence the resort to prostitution) in the property-preserving motives of class society. Citing evidence of divorce judges, the socialist may also ask whether a main reason for the break-up even of love-inspired marriages is not the housing short-age, with the consequent problems, rather than the temptations of illicit romance.

The Committee writes as though the economic emancipation of women even in class society was an accomplished fact. It isn't. Only when it is accomplished—and no pill ever dreamed of by the chemists can do this—will proper conditions be created for testing the innate worth of marriage or any other institution.

Engels believed that in such circumstances prostitution would vanish; 'monogamy, instead of collapsing, at last becomes a reality.
—for men also!" But he added that this question would be decided by a new generation of men who had never known what it was to buy a woman's surrender and a generation of women who had never had to give themselves to a man for fear of the economic consequences.

When these people are in the world, they will care precious little for what anybody today thinks they should do. They will make their own practice and their corresponding public opinion about the practice of each individual — and that will be the end of it.

It is impossible even to speculate about this without one's thoughts being influenced by the prejudices and preconceptions arising from existing society and existing levels of knowledge. Some of the pamphlet's own statements, cautious as they are, may turn out to have been too sweeping — for instance, as to the nature of women's sexual response.

We can say, however, with Engels, that the rules and practices of the new society will be formulated with little or decreasing impediment due to ignorance and with no impediment at all deriving from class-based prejudice. To achieve a situation where such rules can be framed to govern not only sexual but all other departments of human conduct seems to be not the least important of the reasons for carrying through the socialist revolution.

FROM THE REPORT of the Child Welfare Advisory Council of NSW on the subject of social problems arising in relation to premarital intercourse, 1967:

15. There are a number of forces in the community that "militate against a sense of responsibility and chastity" in adolescent relationships, among them:

(a) Adult control. Adolescents have an understandable lack of respect for current adult standards, and this tends to lessen the effectiveness of adult control.

(b) Models for behaviour. The moral code of society and the accepted standards of behaviour have become progressively less clear to the adolescent; the influence of the mass media may accentuate this.

(c) Difficulty of supervision. The mobility and affluence of the contemporary adolescent make chaperoning or its equivalent virtually impossible.

(d) Encouragement of a teenage cult. Having much money to spend on "pleasure", the adolescent is the subject of a campaign by a section of the commercial world to over-stimulate and exploit the "teenager". The personal transistor radio — the voice of exploitation — is powerful.