

## BODY PIERCING, BLOOD RITES & TRANSSEXUALISM

### THOMAS STORCK

# HATING THE BODY

It is common nowadays to say that America's present cultural and social ills began in the 1960s. But while the 60s have much to answer for, they may not deserve a blanket condemnation. As the late orthodox Protestant theologian Francis Schaeffer observed:

It became obvious to students in the early sixties that we were living in a post-Christian world. As students in Berkeley shouted in 1964, we are living in a plastic culture. The beat generation before them had been saying that, and now an entire student generation had become convinced of it. Students would return home from the university and ask their parents questions and would get only superficial answers: You must work like mad to get into the university. Why? So you can make money. But why should I want to make money? So you can send your children to the university. All too often personal peace and affluence were the only values that these young people saw in their parents, and they rightly were turned off.

Schaeffer goes on to say, "Christians should have been glad for what these students were saying. In fact, they should have been saying it themselves, for these young people had put their finger

on the situation as it really was." What can we call the way of life that the 1960s were calling into question? The classic name for it is *bourgeois*. Bourgeois culture craves as its highest goods the money, security, and "personal peace and affluence" that the young people of that time so rightly disdained. But where did bourgeois culture come from? It grew out of the philosophy of individualism and materialism originating in the Enlightenment of the 18th century.

American culture was formed by the philosophy of the Enlightenment, and the strain of Enlightenment thought especially potent here is that of René Descartes. Tocqueville noted in the 1830s that "of all countries in the world, America is the one in which the precepts of Descartes are least studied and best followed," and Descartes's cold, atomistic view of the world had long been at work quietly shaping the American soul. In Descartes's view of things, soul is reduced to mind, and mind is set at odds with body. All bodies are considered as simply dead extended matter. (Animals, for example, since they lack mind, were conceived of in the Cartesian tradition as complex machines.) The effect is that the body is devalued and human nature is denied, for it is simply external mathematical forces that shape all material reality. No kind of reality is more natural than another, for all are shaped by external stresses and pressures.

Thus by the 1950s the body, and particularly its sexual functions, were widely held to have been neglected if not despised. An example of this was the convention that television would not show even a married couple together in the same bed, as if sex did not exist. And akin to this was the existence of merely conventional modes of behavior that were held to have the same binding force as natural law

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or revealed truth. Thus, violation of cultural norms about facial hair was reprobated as strongly as real sin. For in truth our bourgeois society had forgotten the difference. It no longer believed in God, it no longer believed in nature, and all it had was a set of conventions about bodily and social behavior that it could not justify.

So to some extent the 1960s were a needed reaction to a culture deformed by a false philosophy. The 60s expressed the desire to find real meaning in life and to discover anew what was natural and distinguish it from what was only conventional. These were authentic calls of the human heart. Unfortunately, the way they were pursued — via fornication, drugs, and rock music — only made things worse.

The 60s are over, but the problems they addressed — and the bad effects of their false solutions — are still with us. We have a resurgent Cartesianism joined with the worst of 60s-style skepticism. There is hedonism aplenty, but little idealism. Casual unchastity is now mainstream, and it coexists with a capitalism that is probably more relentless than during the 1950s, as well as an educational system that focuses more than ever on job training and moneymaking. Yet the sense of being denatured by a desiccated modernity is still with us, and some young people seek to react critically to it. But what shape can the reaction to Cartesianism take today? Fornication and rock music and even drugs are now part of the establishment. Since the bourgeoisie have appropriated the earlier forms of revolt, today the revolt takes what seems to be a more extreme form, that of attacking the body itself. Piercings, tattoos, scarrings, and brandings are employed in a desperate effort to break the bonds of bourgeois life. The bonds are real, but these practices will not help, principally because they themselves are examples of the same Cartesian attitude toward the body.

In this essay I want to explore some of the desperate forms that the revolt against the bourgeoisie takes today. And I will explore another type of Cartesian hatred of the body which — mixed with a sexual permissiveness derived from the 1960s — combines the worst features of the 60s and the 90s.

In the 1960s the attempt to overthrow the Cartesian attitude toward the body took various

forms: sexual license, beards, long hair, wild clothes. Today these phenomena don't carry the meaning or impact they did then. Beards are no longer unusual. Unchaste sex is part of bourgeois life. As I said above, the attempt to break out of the bourgeois boundaries of our culture now takes such forms as tattoos, piercings, and other mutilations, which seem to be ways of denigrating the body, even of actively hating it. Often painful and medically dangerous, these grotesque practices reduce the body to an object of experimentation. But the body-piercing fad has now become mainstream. Just as bourgeois culture was able to assimilate unchastity, drugs, and rock music, so it has now assimilated body piercing. As a result, there are those who go beyond these now tame practices, and are sometimes called Modern Primitives or Urban Primitives.

In their desire for something "genuine," or simply in their desire to be different, Modern Primitives or Urban Primitives, like the drug-users of the 1960s, seek wisdom not in the dry rationalism of the Cartesian tradition but in the religious traditions of Asia or of primitive tribal groups. They employ such practices as lying on beds of nails or initiation rites that might involve "hanging from a cottonwood tree with hooks in [the] chest." But even beyond this, according to an article in *SF Weekly* in October 1997, the latest phenomenon is sharing blood — drinking it, or sprinkling it over one another. Consider some remarks from the people involved:

This is primal. This touches some deep places. I think the impulse to wake up by any means necessary is a healthy impulse. When you're desperate, and you don't see any options, and you're trying to find a way out of the nightmare of modern society, you use whatever means you have. A lot of people feel numb, especially young people. They don't want to feel that way. They want to wake up, to throw off conditioning from Big Brother and Madison Avenue and decide for themselves what's important and what's real.

This was a culture that was sold on the idea of progress since the turn of the century — clean lines, industrial aesthetic,

mass-produced clothes.... There's a sense of meaninglessness in this, so there's a search for meaning — a belief that other ways of life might have more authenticity....

The main ideas in blood ritual are achieving wisdom through excess. It's about a kind of magical transformation.

How should a Christian, a Catholic, react to this? Allowing for a certain amount of hyperbole and for the following of fashion, it does seem to me that this is an attempt to escape from a society rightly perceived as culturally stifling. Unlike the bourgeois hedonist, the practitioners of the blood cult somehow dimly understand that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin (Heb. 9:22). But since they do not know Whose blood it was that had to be shed, they are easy prey for the very real devils that have always been associated with pagan sacrificial rites. The idealism of the 60s devolved after a few years into a new bourgeois hedonism. Whatever idealism there may be in the blood-and-scar-ring cult of the 90s is likely to decay in an even shorter time into real worship of the Evil One, and perhaps even into human sacrifice.

Another thought that ought to arise in the mind of a Catholic when he reads of Modern Primitives and blood cults is that the emasculation of Catholicism has contributed to the rise of this new paganism. We no longer chant Latin in darkened churches with votive lights flickering in corners; we no longer teach a true asceticism of the body; the mystery has been removed from the liturgy of the sacrifice of the genuine Blood that washes away sin. Is it any wonder that men turn to false rites and practices that can still deliver a punch and make demands on the participant? Until Catholics realize that the rationalistic tradition that conceives of reason as merely an instrumental device for getting things done will never supply us with wisdom and that it is Aristotle and Aquinas who must be our teachers and masters — not Descartes or Newton or Adam Smith — in short, until the Catholic Church can break the mold of bourgeois and Cartesian culture and reclaim for herself a true Catholic culture, we will not be able to compete with those who offer vivid religious experience, even if the religion turns out to be from Hell, not Heaven.

In sum, the revolt against Cartesianism and the bourgeois way of life that began in the 1960s and continues in the 90s still manifests Cartesian features, especially a willingness to abuse the body. Yet I think that in some cases it reflects a desire for something authentic, even though it is sadly mistaken about the means. But there are other Cartesian practices now widespread in our society which do not have any of the redeeming features that those discussed above might possess.

In the first place, I cannot omit to mention (though it is sociologically very different from what will follow) the nearly two-billion-dollar-a-year cosmetic surgery industry, of which breast enlargement is the most common example. Here also is Cartesianism run rampant, for the body is treated not as part of the human body-soul complex, but as a mere shell, which can be manipulated according to the will of its possessor. Cosmetic surgery is very much mainstream. Aging baby-boomers, who once upon a time were seeking to overthrow bourgeois culture, now embrace the most cynical Cartesian mutilation of the body in pursuit of a new bourgeois hedonism.

This is bad enough, but in what I am about to discuss now, 60s hedonism and resurgent 90s Cartesianism are mixed in the most repulsive and destructive manner. What I am referring to is the phenomenon known as transsexualism, which is the situation where someone believes that he (or she) was somehow born with the wrong kind of body, that although biologically one is a male (or female), nature made a mistake, and one is psychologically the opposite of what one's body would indicate. Persuaded of this, some people undergo extensive hormonal treatment and surgical mutilation of their bodies in order to make them appear to be of the sex they feel they should be. Others do not go so far, but to one degree or another express their discomfort with their bodies. (Sometimes *transsexuals* are considered to be those who physically alter their bodies via "sex-change" operations, while those who merely assume certain personal or social traits of the opposite sex are called *transgendered* persons.) Thus, in a typically Cartesian manner, transsexuals place their minds in opposition to their bodies and attempt to subject their bodies to their own wills. Yet during all this, they proclaim that they are liberating themselves

from a stifling Judeo-Christian ethic that repressed their bodies and their sexuality. As a writer named Jamison "James" Green put it in the winter 1998 edition of *Feminist Collections*, "[Transgenderism] is not a fad, not a flash-in-the-pan phenomenon, but representative of a genuine cultural transition that I believe is evolving in our midst. We are trying to get our collective hands around the concepts of sex and gender, one of the last (as far we know now) psychological and social frontiers, and if we can grasp it, understand it, and learn to live with it, I believe we can ultimately be freed from the yoke of sex and gender oppression."

Now, while it may be true that chemical imbalances can play a role in creating this dissonance between body and soul, it is still the case that the solution adopted, namely, surgical alteration of the body, is thoroughly Cartesian. Those who undergo such operations are in fact the ones who are repressing their bodies and their sexuality in obedience to their wills, which is a spiritual principle, an aspect of their souls. For ordinarily if we see someone so alienated from his body that he rejects all that he is, we would conclude that he has deep psychological problems and is in need of therapy — that it is his soul (or at least his brain) that needs treatment, not his body. (We would see this most extremely in someone who thought he was an animal — e.g., a dog.)

In a sense, the body does not lie, whereas we know that the human psyche can and often does lie. It frequently fails to understand itself or perceive reality correctly. But this is not true of the body, which simply is what it is. It is quite true that the body is not *all* there is to man; the will and the intellect, the aspects of man which were responsible for the Fall and have been most deeply affected by Original Sin, are in the soul. The body remains innocent until subject to the machinations of the psyche. But our Cartesianism requires us to treat our bodies as just so much dead extended matter, to be mutilated and rearranged according to the demands of our psyches, which in turn are to be pampered and coddled, no matter how far they are from perceiving reality.

Even if the phenomenon of transsexualism is caused by hormonal or other chemical imbalance in the physical system, it is still correct to say that the body has not lied. For just as a chemical imbalance

that results in a mental illness does not validate the sufferer's psychotic fantasies, neither can such an imbalance be used to uphold the notion that one is really of the opposite sex. Deformities and abnormalities of both body and soul occur in mankind. But we do not judge the physical or even psychological norm for humanity by such abnormalities.

Before going on, it might be well to mention here the use of the two words "sex" and "gender." "Sex," in the sense in which I am speaking of it here, has always referred to the fact that the human race is divided into two groups for the purpose of reproduction, and that the bodies of the members of these two groups are structured to facilitate this purpose. "Gender," on the other hand, has always meant the division of *words* into masculine, feminine, and neuter in language: It refers to a grammatical classification. At some point in recent years people began using "gender" when they should have said "sex," so that now these words are often used interchangeably. Some of those who promoted the new usage were prudes who did not want to use a word ("sex") that also meant the reproductive process itself. They were embarrassed by "sex," even though God Himself had created it and provided a special sacrament for it. But more sinisterly, another group also began to substitute "gender" for "sex." These were people who hated the fact that God had created mankind with only two sexes. They wanted to legitimize the various activities of "cross-dressers, transsexuals, intersex people, Two Spirits, masculine females, feminine males, drag kings and drag queens" (Leslie Feinberg, *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*). But since everyone knew there were only two sexes, they wanted us to forget this fact and focus instead on the concept of gender, a concept that in their mind meant "the social roles and behaviors deemed appropriate for the sexes." Their efforts were to dissociate "gender" from sex. And as we are about to see, the dissociation of sex and gender is one of the major ways in which the concept of two sexes is being undermined.

Since we will be looking at some of the most unbelievable proposals to restructure human sexuality, we should first look at the right way of distinguishing sex and sex roles, or as some would put it, sex and gender. Now, it seems to me that one

who recognizes that mankind is the creation of a loving God would have to assert that although expressions of masculinity and femininity can legitimately vary to some extent from culture to culture and from one era to another, nevertheless they must be rooted in maleness and femaleness. Neither masculinity nor femininity is malleable without limit, for the physical and psychological differences between the sexes and their obvious God-given functions relating to childbearing and child-rearing require respect. Moreover, both St. Paul and St. Peter in the New Testament are quite explicit about the order of the family as regards the two sexes. So although at some times and in some places it has been considered appropriate for men to cry in public and at other times and places not, for women to smoke and at other times and places not, such behaviors do not affect the central core of maleness or femaleness. Cultures may vary as long as they do not interfere with that fundamental set of behaviors that flows immediately from our very maleness or femaleness. But as we will see, the project of feminist and radical gender deconstruction does not look at things this way.

Those who hate the fact that mankind is divided into two sexes, with a corresponding range of behaviors rooted in this natural fact, try to destroy the idea that any sex-related behavior is natural. They say instead that the behavior that seems to flow from maleness or femaleness is in fact a societal "construct." Some would admit the reality of the two biological sexes, but after that all is in flux. Thus, one physically female person can describe herself as a "masculine, lesbian, female-to-male cross-dresser and transgenderist" (in Feinberg, *Trans Liberation*). Basing their theories on the margins of human behavior, they then make such margins normative. It is as if they were to assert that since some humans think they are dogs, the canine personality is as natural to us as the human. Having first rejected the notion of any natural norms, they logically go the next step and throw out statistical norms. All that remains is flux.

It might seem that the mutilation of the body, and indeed of the human personality, engaged in by transsexuals is the summit of the hatred of the human that I speak of here. But it is not. For the ultimate project of many transsexuals, and others as well, is to proclaim the utter irrelevance of the

body, or at least of its sexual aspects. For they assert that there are not just two sexes; and there are not just the six or seven sexes (or genders) that some revisionists have advocated (hermaphrodite, male homosexual, lesbian, transsexual, etc.). Instead there is just human sexuality, a continuum on which "male" and "female" are only two points on a line that extends indefinitely. The book of Genesis declares, "Male and female He created them." But the new teaching seeks to replace that by declaring, in effect, "Sexuality is." For instead of a defined process and activity, created for definite natural ends which are inherent in the process, this view simply asserts that any kind of genital activity engaged in by anyone with anything and in any way fulfills the meaning of sexuality. We have progressed to the point, so these would say, where we must overthrow not just God but also nature. Reality itself is now our oppressor.

One can see the dynamic of this in homosexuality. Homosexuals argue that since they are attracted to persons of the same sex, therefore for them this is proper sexuality, even natural sexuality. Of course this is absurd, as the logic and structure of their *bodies* proclaim. But still homosexuals at least seem to keep the notion of two sexes, just that some members of each sex are inclined toward same-sex relationships. But this is illusory. For in fact, as soon as we escape from the rule of the body's own logic, from the conduct indicated by the very shape and function of the body and its parts, then we are in a fantasy land where anything can be, anything that the mind can imagine and the will can desire. We end up with a world in which we have "those who blur or bridge the boundary of gender expression they were assigned at birth: cross-dressers, transsexuals, intersex people," and so on. Sexuality simply is, and sex simply happens.

This deconstruction of sexuality is manifested, for example, in the career of one who is known as Kate Bornstein:

Kate Bornstein is neither a man nor a woman but "hir" own special transgressive creation — and, inevitably, something of a traveling circus. "Ze" was born male, raised as a boy, opted for a sex-change in adulthood, and became a woman. A few years later, she got tired of being a woman so she

stopped — but didn't want to become a man again (*The Independent* [London], March 8, 1998).

Supporters of this way of life believe that once we recognize that transsexuality is not a "gender illness" which can be cured by surgery, then we will realize that "transsexuality may be more destabilizing than homosexuality." For then even "biological sex is revealed to have no inevitable natural meaning, but only the social meaning attached to it on the basis of gender identity" (*Harvard Law Review*, June 1995). There is no nature; again, sexuality simply is.

Today we are confronted culturally by a badly

confused attempt to destroy Cartesian culture which itself engages in the extremes of Cartesian behavior, and by those who deny the obvious fact that human sexual activity and sexual organs have a natural purpose or finality.

Only if we return to God, in fact to Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate, the Redeemer of both bodies and souls, do we have any hope of returning either to nature or to cultural sanity. Though the modern world shows little interest in such a return, we Christians must continually point out that the world has strayed from God and from nature. We must point to Jesus Christ as the only remedy. For without such a return we cannot expect much future for the human race. ■

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## THE TRUTH ABOUT THE ASSISTED-SUICIDE MOVEMENT

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WESLEY J. SMITH

### WHEN DEATH IS OUR PHYSICIAN

It is hard to tell the truth about assisted suicide. Or rather, it's hard to get people to listen. Folks generally are about as eager to delve into the issue of assisted suicide as they are to work out the details of their own funeral. It's a delicate and unnerving subject, involving the ultimate issues of life: the reality of human mortality; fears about illness, disability, and old age; and the loss of loved ones to the dark, dank grave. Thus simply getting people to pay close attention to assisted suicide — to grapple with its threat — is often a challenging task.

This is even true of people who are religious

or prolife, whose faith informs them that death isn't the end but the beginning. In my work as an anti-euthanasia activist, I have often appeared in front of prolife and religious organizations to speak about assisted suicide. More often than not, event organizers tell me that the audience is one-half to two-thirds the size of their audiences for programs about abortion or some other issue of concern to these communities. This has happened so many times now that it is a clear pattern.

I don't take the empty chairs personally. I understand the emotional dynamic at work. Life is difficult and worrisome enough without visiting the painful realm of assisted suicide. It is difficult, even for deeply religious people, to listen, to heed, and to care enough to become involved. But avoidance of the assisted-suicide issue is a luxury that those who believe in the infinite value of all human life can no longer afford, because battles over assisted suicide are being waged — and more battles planned — throughout the country. Tragically, one major battle

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