

## FREE CONDOMS WHEN YOU COME TO CHURCH?

Yesterday, looking toward our soon vote on the proposed resolution against the availability of condoms in our public schools, we had a highly informative forum on current American teen sex vis-a-vis AIDS. The ensuing discussion was vigorous. As the author of the resolution, I feel moved to the following comments on the meeting....The panel was a pastor (P), a school nurse (N), & a university-professor AIDS-educator (E).

1 N said "abstinence is the first choice....We talk about spirituality, not religion." E agreed. P agreed with the first clause but doubted the efficacy of the second: "Do the schools use the community's religious leaders to acquaint students with our religious heritage on sexuality?" N: "Not in the health curriculum," & "to my knowledge" nowhere else. NOTE:

(1) The sick split between spirituality (a wholly private, individualistic affair) & religion (the core of culture).

(2) The physical captivity of sexuality, which is split off from wholeness & assigned to the health department. This myopic captivity is crucial to the AIDS question. Wherever the medical model dominates, the soul is squeezed out, & the question shrinks down into "What is going to happen to bodies?" That question then further shrinks down into "How do we get condoms on penises?" From this perspective, the panicky preachment seems to carry the weight of both logic & love: "We must protect our children! It's not a moral [or religious] question, it's a matter of life & death!" At this deteriorated level of discussion, we opponents of condoms in the schools appear to be both illogical & unloving! Case closed!

2 When I pressed the panel for commitment on the issue, P & N refused to commit themselves, but E--who is also a VNA nurse testing for HIV in South Dennis--strongly urged the availability of free condoms (along with free toilet paper & free sanitary napkins) in public buildings, including schools, & even in churches (suggesting a free-condoms box in our foyer)....Since the forum is to lead to our church's vote, I considered it important to press the panel for yes/no commitment: what action should our church take on the anti-condoms-in-schools resolution? Such action is difficult: no Cape Cod congregation has yet taken it.

3 Since she's daily testing for HIV, E has condoms on the brain. But she honestly pointed to their fallibility: they are only 85 % effective in preventing conception, which can occur only five days in the menstrual month: how much less effective in protecting against HIV, which can be gotten any day of the week, month, year? (She did not mention the further cautionary fact that the HIV virus is 150 times smaller than spermata.) Condoms are a risky way to steer between celibacy & promiscuity, risky vis-a-vis pregnancy & sexually contracted diseases.

4 The Mass. Board of Education was narrow-minded, fear-driven in recommending condoms in our state's public schools. Ironically, the same forces--the educational establishment--accuse religion of teaching fear of sex! But biblical religion, Christian & Jewish, teaches that love of God is a stronger motive for responsible sex than is fear of the consequences of genital sex. As I put it in the meeting, "Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, residences of God, who smiles when we use them for love & weeps when we abuse them for lust." PROBLEM: The public schools think themselves prohibited from teaching this positive motivational perspective, so the negative prevails.

5 A further irony is that condoms in public schools violate the public-school policy of neutrality, curricular & extracurricular activities being severely censored so as to be "inoffensive to feminists, business interests, gays, lesbians, unions, blacks, seniors, Jews, Christians, scientists, and Christian Scientists" (John E. Coons, "School Choice as Simple Justice," Apr'92 FIRST THINGS, p.17). Condoms anywhere offend America's largest religious organization, the Roman Catholic Church. Recreational sex, especially among teeners, offends the Jewish antidualistic emphasis on body-soul wholeness. Since both Jews & Christians hold up the

ideal of premarital abstinence, both religions are offended by a teen-sex policy that sends wrong signals & fights good physical, emotional ("psychological"), moral, & spiritual sex education.

6 The panel did not touch on school condoms' message to the children: "Sex is OK, but you should protect yourselves." Both clauses are highly questionable. I've already dealt with the second: are you really protecting yourself? As for the first, what right has the school to say that nonmarital teen sex is OK? Who sez? Not our religious communions. And increasingly, not scholars & practioners in the social sciences.

The claim that that message is not sent to the children is a quibble. The children understand that whatever is not forbidden is allowed, & whatever is distributed is promoted.

7 A third irony: Whatever promotes teen sex spreads the AIDS danger--so school condoms may increase the spread of teen AIDS, the very reverse of the policy's promise! The equation is undeniable: increase the incidence of sexual intercourse (not matter what flawed "protection" is used, & all are flawed), & you increase the incidence of AIDS.

8 A POWER QUESTION: Should religious institutions pressure public institutions? Those who say that our congregation should not give advice to the Barnstable School Committee should meditate on American history. Eg, recall the pressure religious institutions put on Washington to get the 1960s civil-rights legislation passed. Such advice & pressure are implicit in (1) biblical religion & (2) the American way of life.

9 We human beings are the only animals capable of anti-instinctual behavior: civilization, as Freud rightly said, is negative. American life today is ragingly positive: people act instinctively, doing what they feel like. School condoms play into this hedonistic-individualistic mood of ethical relativism & intellectual nihilism. The schools should be bastions against this barbarism. A condom in school is a Trojan horse, an enemy within the gates. Can our public schools be expected to shift to the civilized mode from their present "values-neutral," if-you-can't-lick-them join-them style? Probably not. The schools have so little will to the requisite discipline the shift would require, that 27% of the populace is illiterate. Millions are giving up on the public schools & demanding choice, & the home-schooling movement is on the rise (parent-sovereignty taking over from school-sovereignty, in most cases so the child's education can be, as is the Bible, God-centered).

School condoms will further alienate the public from the public schools & hasten the end of the educational establishment's present virtual monopoly.

10 A fourth irony: "Prior restraint" can mean restraining instinctual behavior for truly human ends, but it is now being exercised by the arrogant public-school establishment against parents who want to educate their children without getting the public-school committee's prior approval of content. On p.1 of today's Cape Cod daily, two mothers have been condemned in court for their acting on what they claim is their right of parental sovereignty in education. If schools would restrain the children rather than the parents, parents would not be so afraid to let their children go to school--afraid for their children's moral & spiritual health, & even for their lives. School condoms are a symptom & metaphor of a profoundly sick & corrupt school system.

11 As an old plant loses energy, it acquires diseases &/or insects, & a change of location will probably only hasten its demise. In our fragmented, pluralistic culture, a single educational system for our variegated populace may not be able to survive. Condoms are bugs/diseases on it. I'll mourn it's passing, but my grief work will be brief.

12 Can the public schools repent? I hope & pray so. Last August in Moscow, this graffito appeared on a statue of Karl Marx: "Workers of the world.....forgive me." If communism could collapse, maybe the public schools can convert.