

Sex and Values an apologetic dialogue

by Michael Fourth

Introduction:

This dialogue is based loosely on a conversation that I had in a pub last Christmas break with two old friends from high school. My friend “Fred” is a postmodern-ish, professional artist with whom I attended junior high and high school. He then went on to Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and returned to Houston upon graduation to pursue his art career there. This is a friend who once told me that Jesus probably is the Son of God but that he likes having sex too much, hence the importance of sex in the following dialogue. He was brought up in a kind of New Age home with a mother who occasionally spoke at the local Unitarian Church.

My friend “Rebecca” is a recent “convert” to the Roman Church despite her professed atheism. She holds to a rather unsophisticated version of constructivist view of religion and morality that she most likely imbibed through the media or perhaps in some of her college classes. She was raised in a horrendous environment with two parents who were just about as alcoholic and dysfunctional as two parents can be. They weren’t abusive nor did they intentionally neglect her. They were just large children who had children of their own.

I have increased the coherence of the discussion and added some aspects that reflect my increased sophistication with respect to philosophical and apologetic knowledge gained over the past year (which speaks only of the *increase* and not of the objective quality). I have, however, tried to preserve the general tone and atmosphere of the original dialogue, so there will be a lot of sarcasm, colloquial language and a few references to beer. I hope that does not offend. I hope that you enjoy reading it, as I had fun reminiscing about the conversation as I wrote the dialogue.

Also, the dialogue is more of the Platonic variety wherein Socrates does most of the long speeches and his interlocutors primarily ask questions and make bold assertions. The conversation was the variety in which my friends were not trying to persuade me of their positions; rather they sought to come to grips with my beliefs while contrasting them with their own. I have tried to give equal weight to both of my interlocutors, so I decided to focus on two questions from each of them. With Fred I address sex and the inherent meaning therein &

the joy of living a life of meaning and purpose. With Rebecca I discuss the distinction between sociology of religion and ontological necessities of belief (Van Til's transcendental argument) & anthropology in light of what she calls my "sin theory."

DIALOGUE:

Fred Okay Michael, what I just don't understand is this whole "no sex" thing.

Michael Well, that came out of nowhere. Do you really want to talk about this right now?

Fred Yeah, sure. I mean you're not going to have sex until you get married? What if you never get married? Don't you think you'll be missing out on something?

Michael Fred, I'm starting to pick up on your fascination with my Christian faith and its relationship to my sexual behavior, or lack thereof. Do you remember the last conversation that we had about this? We were at Maxwell's Pub, and you told me that Jesus was likely the Son of God, but you enjoyed having sex too much.

Fred It just confuses me. Sex is such an integral part of what it means to be a human being, and you Christians deny yourself that aspect of your humanity.

Rebecca What are you talking about over there?

Michael Fred's fascination with my nonexistent sex life. He's simply looking out for me I suppose, or he's just perplexed by my decisions. One of the two. I haven't figured that out yet.

Rebecca Fred, if that's the kind of story that Michael wants to live by, then why bother him about it? It's a nice story.

Michael Nice story? I remember the last time you said that to me. We were at Fox and the Hound, and you said that the Bible was a collection of stories. I told you it was the Word of God, and you promptly collected your things and left the place. Do you remember that?

Rebecca No.

Michael It happened just like that. You said something like, "I think I'm going to leave now." Then you stormed out.

Rebecca Well Michael, if you did say that, then I reacted appropriately. You shouldn't try to push your views on other people. That's intolerant.

Michael Aren't you Catholic? This isn't my story. It should be your story, too.

Rebecca It is my story, but I don't actually believe it. I mean, I'm an atheist, but the Catholic Church gives my life structure and meaning. It's a helpful story to model my life after, but I would not go so far as to actually believe it.

Michael Wait, you're an Atheistic Roman Catholic?

Rebecca Yes.

Michael (Under my breath) That's going to come up at judgment.

Fred Okay, back to my original question. Don't you feel like you're missing out on something? Don't you see that denying your sexuality is denying part of who you are?

Michael I find it interesting that you speak in this way considering that without God there is no reason for you to believe that there is an essential nature to humankind, sexual or not. Additionally, you have no reason to posit any value on sex beyond mere pleasure, but then you have to explain to me why pleasure is valuable. Even if pleasure were inherently valuable, which you cannot prove from your belief structure, what if my abstinence brings me a great deal of pleasure? Additionally, Christians are not denying their sexuality. That was one of Nietzsche's critiques of Christianity; he said that we are life denying. We're not life-denying. We're sin-denying. There's a difference.

Fred What's the difference?

Rebecca And what if we don't buy into your "sin theory"?

Michael Well Rebecca, let me answer Fred's question first.

Rebecca Okay. I'm going to the bar. Does anybody want anything?

Fred I'll have a Sierra Nevada Pale Ale.

Michael Make that two, thanks. (Rebecca exits)

Fred, the reason that you do not understand what I am saying about sex is because we are viewing sex, and the rest of life for that matter, from two wildly different perspectives. You see sex as essential to your humanity, and in some sense you are correct. Your realization that it is essential to your humanity stems largely from the empirical evidence that human beings are sexually inclined with very few exceptions, but you do not know why. You see that the majority of people seek out sex rather indiscriminately, but you fail to ask whether they should. You sit here

telling me that I should be engaging in sexual relations, since your empirical studies have shown you that everyone else does. This, however, is an illegitimate logical leap, since the renowned Scottish philosopher David Hume convincingly argued: you cannot empirically derive “ought” from “is.” This means that all of your empirical observations do not amount to a hill of beans when it comes to what I ought to do, the realm of ethics.

Fred Interesting, but I can’t help but feel that I have a right to sex. It makes me calmer and a nicer person to be around.

Michael Sex may indeed make you a calmer person and nicer to be around. That proves nothing by itself. It can just as easily be interpreted as corroborating my faith, since mere advantages to sex does not *de facto* indict my beliefs. One thing that you have not considered is that advantages and disadvantages need to be viewed on a longer timeline than what benefits me here and now. Even Epicurus denounced heeding carnal pleasures at the drop of a hat; he viewed the pleasures of this life along a continuum.

Anyway, I never said that sex was bad, and neither does the Bible. God is pro-sex. Yet, your thoughts about sex being a right are derived again from a different perspective. You see the pragmatic benefits of sex, and that is all that concerns you. You see only that, because you think that the sum and substance to sex is some biological and genetic predisposition to propagate your seed. You have illegitimately reduced it to mere physicality. You have no warrant for believing that it is mere physicality. You simply choose to, because that fits your “wants” more than a biblical perspective does.

The Christian, however, sees sex in eternal and metaphorical terms that illuminate the meaning and purpose of sex. Sex is not simply the product of some blind force of evolution. The meaning of sex extends far beyond some reductive allegiance to the doctrine of natural selection. Rather sex is a divine gift that shows forth a glimpse of the nature of God and the joy of being in fellowship with Him. That being the case the Christian seeks to protect the sanctity of the divine gift and to heed God’s instructions concerning the proper time and place. The Scriptures tell me that sex is for one man and one woman within the confines of marriage.

In a sense the Christian is more pro-sex than the non-Christian. We respect it more, and we seek to promote its true meaning and purpose.

Rebecca Here you go. (Handing the beers to Fred and me)

Fred That was quick.

Rebecca It pays to be a regular and to know the bartenders.

Michael I guess so.

Do you see what I am saying Fred?

Fred I do, but are you not making a leap that is just as arbitrary as mine. If you say that I am illegitimately reducing the act of sex to the physical, then why is your assertion not a *mere* assertion? The answer is that it's not. Your assertion cannot be perceived as any less arbitrary than mine.

Michael Well, if you isolate this discussion of sex from the rest of the evidence and logical necessity substantiating the Christian faith, then you are correct. The fact is, however, that my statements flow forth from a holistic view of life and the world that amounts to a coherent whole. Your assertions flow forth from your desire for it to be so. My beliefs concerning sex come from my beliefs in the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church down through the centuries. You have stated to me previously that your denial of the Christian faith stems from a felt need to engage in premarital sex. Your desire for your beliefs to be true does not make them true; it makes them wishful thinking.

Okay, to change the subject just a bit. We'll get back to sex later. Now that Rebecca has rejoined us from her quick trip to the bar... Rebecca, what's with this professed atheism? I remember that you became a Roman Catholic while you were dating Neil, because you thought that the two of you were going to get married. Were you an atheist back then as well?

Rebecca Yes.

Michael Then why would you join a Church that clearly professes to believe the exact opposite of what you believe? It just doesn't make sense.

Rebecca Like I said before, it's a nice story to live by.

Michael So you think the rest of us are deluding ourselves?

Rebecca Well, in a way, yes. I believe that you fail to realize the true purpose of religion which is a story within which to order your life. The fact that people actually believe it does not detract from the beneficial aspects that it brings to society and to the individual.

Michael You find nothing wrong with the fact that the Church is engaged in mass delusion, just so long as they continue to propagate a useful message that is beneficial?

Rebecca Yes.

Michael How can that be beneficial when it is, according to you, a pack of falsehood? I guess what I'm asking is: what does it mean to be beneficial? And how can you posit value on that which is beneficial? Why is that necessarily good?

Rebecca Well, it's not *necessarily* good. It was just decided a long time ago that such-and-such is a good story to live by, so we will live by it.

Michael You haven't answered my question. Why is that a good thing?

Rebecca Because it helps people order their lives.

Michael And why is that a good thing?

Rebecca Because it is better to have an ordered life than an unordered life.

Michael Why?

Rebecca Because a life with meaning... I don't know. Just because it's good.

Fred What are you getting at Michael?

Michael Listen, those who do not believe in God seem to have no problem holding to value systems and meaning and purpose, but they have no reason to do so. They have no *why*. My question is what are the conditions which make meaning, purpose and value possible? You can't have those things in an atheistic universe.

Rebecca We do have those things.

Michael The fact that things are, the fact that there is something rather than nothing, is plain for anyone to see, besides perhaps the mentally ill. The question that most people fail to address is why there is something rather than nothing. Even Martin Heidegger, certainly a man who was far from being a Christian, recognized that this is the primary question of philosophy. What are the conditions that necessarily need to exist in order for the world as we know it to exist? What conditions need to exist for there to be universal codes of logic? What conditions need to exist in order to explain the nearly unanimous consensus on rudimentary ethics? What conditions need to exist in order to account for meaning and purpose? A pragmatic view of religion is not bad *in itself*, but it is insufficient *by itself*. Does the fact that my faith works sustain my beliefs? Yes. Is that all that is necessary to sustain my beliefs? No. You have reduced the realm of truth illegitimately to the pragmatic in the same way that Fred collapsed

all of the richness of sexuality to the physical.

Rebecca Meaning, purpose and value are merely words and ideas, though. They are concepts that have arisen over time and been a matter of consensus.

Why do I need to speculate concerning the conditions that make word associations possible? They are simply word associations.

Michael That's a pretty bold statement, since you have very little proof of any of this. It is mere conjecture. You make a blanket statement that life reduces to mere word associations, but you fail to account for the fact that the majority of people in the history of the world have disagreed with that very popular, contemporary notion. You are merely being caught up in the spirit of the day, and you have not critically examined that statement. Couple that with the fact that you are still failing to distinguish between the social dynamics of how we come to know these elements of our daily lives and the conditions that are necessary for them to exist in the first place. I do not deny the legitimacy of the sociological study of religion, but you cannot deny the fact that you have ignored the ontological, in lieu of the merely sociological.

Let me tell you a story.

Rebecca Oooooooooo, I love stories.

Michael Rebecca, your biting sarcasm has been noted. May I proceed?

Rebecca Sorry. Yes, please continue.

Michael I find our conversation very interesting, because people have had this conversation before. There is a debate on tape between a Christian philosopher and apologist named Greg Bahnsen and an atheist named Gordon Stein. This fundamental, but common, misunderstanding that you are falling prey to is the very distinction that Gordon Stein failed to make in his debate with Greg Bahnsen. Because he failed to make such a distinction, he was never *in* the debate. He got steamrolled.

Rebecca You can explain that distinction to me again, but I'm sure that I'll disagree.

Michael You're putting up a mighty nice wall, considering the fact that you and Fred instigated this conversation with me.

Rebecca You're right. I'm sorry. I'll listen this time and try to get what you are saying.

Michael It boils down to this: when you seek to answer a question that is

transcendental and ontological in nature with a sociological answer you make a category mistake. The existence of ontological realities and socio-cultural processes are not mutually exclusive. The God of the Bible is a God who works through means not brute fiat power.

Rebecca What do you mean “means”?

Michael Why was Jesus crucified?

Rebecca Because he pissed off his contemporary Jews.

Michael You’re right, but that is not the whole story. There is more than one level of causality. He was also crucified because God providentially ordained that it should happen. God’s will was carried out through the means of the Jews and the Romans, understand?

Rebecca Okay, I understand what you mean by “means.”

Michael Do you now understand the distinction that I am trying to draw between questions of a transcendental nature and the socio-cultural answers that you are trying to provide?

Rebecca I understand what you are saying, but I’ll have to think about that some more.

Michael Fair enough.

Let us now return to the question from Rebecca that I postponed answering earlier. Rebecca wanted to know about my “sin theory” as she called it. It’s actually the Scriptures that speak of the fallenness of man. I merely got it from the Bible.

Rebecca You take the Bible literally when it speaks of all that mythology stuff?

Michael Well, it depends upon what you mean by “literally” and “mythology stuff” (as I make air quotes with my hands). Let us, however, deal with one question at a time. What did you mean when you asked me about my “sin theory”?

Rebecca What about the fact that a lot of people think of man as essentially good? Maybe I shouldn’t use the word “essential,” but you understand what I mean. What about the evolutionist’s explanation for greed and selfishness? What about Freud and his theory of the unconscious? What about all of these other explanations of human behavior?

Michael Well, you want me to cover the Biblical doctrine of the fallenness of man,

evolutionary psychology and psychoanalysis? What shall we do after that five minutes is up?

Rebecca What?

Michael Rebecca, I'm kidding with you. Obviously, these are enormous issues, and I can only scratch the surface with respect to a defense against them. First, let us deal with the idea that man is inherently good. I agree, but that is not the whole story. Man has a certain nobility and dignity, and that is what these people are perceiving when they make claims that man is inherently good.

Rebecca Can you say "mankind" or "humanity" instead of "man"?

Michael I'll try, but old habits die hard. The legacy of Western culture is for the male designation to serve as the neuter designation as well. Don't blame me. Like I was saying, mankind has a certain dignity. I won't say that it is an inherent dignity, because it isn't. This dignity is there, because God placed it there upon creating man and woman. This is what the Bible speaks of when it says that God made mankind in His image, the *imago Dei* in theological jargon.

Rebecca So Christians don't think that man is wholly bad?

Michael Did the teacher of your catechism class at the Roman Catholic Church speak as if man is wholly evil?

Rebecca No, I got that impression from the Protestants that I know.

Michael Occasionally Christians get a bit lopsided in the way that they speak about things, and Protestants tend to lean in the direction of the depravity of man. That in no way deters the message of the Bible that speaks of both the nobility of man AND his fallenness.

Rebecca This is news to me.

Michael Pascal said that one cannot make sense out of the dual nature of man, both noble and sinful, but by that belief one can make sense of everything else. That's a loose paraphrase; he said something like that. This understanding of the dual nature of man makes sense out of the rest of human experience. That is one reason that I remain a Christian.

Janice (One of Rebecca's friends sitting nearby, having overheard our conversation, decided to intrude, quite rudely I might add.) Well if you're a Christian, then what are you doing in a bar, huh? Aren't you being a hypocrite? Why are you trying to convert people here? Don't you realize the fact that all roads lead to the same place? There are

many roads up the mountain, and all your witnessing is simply intolerant babble.

(And she turned back to her previous conversation as abruptly as she intruded into ours. Rebecca and Fred both turned to me with surprise.)

Michael And people say we Christians are intolerant.

Rebecca Well, Janice has a point.

Michael And what point would that be?

Rebecca That Christians are intolerant, because they don't respect people and the fact that their beliefs work for them. Who are Christians to say what is right and what is wrong? Who knows? Let's just do our best to get along and not kill each other.

Michael And you think that should be the way that everyone leads his or her own life?

Rebecca Yes, I do.

Michael So you think that such an attitude should be applied across the board as a prescription for moral behavior?

Rebecca Yes, I do.

Michael So you think that such an attitude should apply universally to all human beings?

Rebecca Yes, Michael, I said I do.

Michael I'm kind of curious how you can make such an assertion considering that you are an atheist.

Rebecca What do you mean?

Michael Well, you said that everyone should live by your moral code of "live and let live," but that is just as dogmatic as what the Christian is saying. Both you and Janice are guiltier of your indictment than Christians are.

Rebecca How do you figure? Fred, can I get some help here?

Fred You're on your own on this one. I want to see where Michael goes with this.

Rebecca Thanks a lot, Fred. (Turning to Michael) Hey, wait a minute! Aren't you being a hypocrite by being here in a bar and drinking a beer?

Michael Why? It says nowhere in the Bible that drinking a beer or any other alcoholic beverage is a sin. As long as I do not get drunk, then I am merely enjoying one of the great gifts of God. In fact, a friend of mine once said that Christians should be the only ones allowed to drink beer and wine, since we are the only ones who know who to thank for it! Anyway, it's just like the conversation that we had about sex earlier. It's not the gift that is sinful according to the Christian, but the abuse or misuse of that gift. Therefore, the Christian tries to be cognizant of the appropriate time and place for everything. Sex belongs within the confines of a monogamous, male/female, marital relationship. Alcohol should be enjoyed only in so far as it can be enjoyed without overindulgence.

Rebecca I guess I just don't get it. This doesn't sound like the Christianity I used to hear at my friend's Baptist church when I was growing up.

Fred Yeah Michael, this is the first time I've ever heard a Christian talk like this.

Michael Perhaps since you guys have known me for a long time, I am the first Christian you have given a chance to explain these things.

Fred Perhaps.

Rebecca I want to get back to me being arrogant and dogmatic. How do you figure that?

Michael I suppose that you buy into that whole "all roads lead to the top of the mountain" stuff, don't you?

Rebecca Of course I don't. That's more Fred's assertion than mine being the "spiritual but not religious" guy. As long as you are seeking to live a good life, then that's all I can ask of anyone.

Michael Good life according to whom?

Rebecca A good life according to the dictates of the culture in which you live.

Michael Well, we discussed this earlier. Why should I give two hoots about what my culture says? If there is no God, then there is no universal. If there is no universal, then I am only answerable to myself.

Rebecca But you have to remember that I said that we should do this because it works. Following the dictates of the culture works. Living a life according to a story that posits meaning and purpose works.

Michael Okay, let's back up. I'm dealing with two different animals. Let's deal with Janice's statements to me about me being intolerant, and then we will get to your assertions of me being intolerant. Then I'll answer any other question on another night. My faculties are beginning to wane.

Rebecca Getting drunk?

Michael No, I'm getting tired. I worked 60 hours this week, and it's 10:30 PM on a Saturday night. On top of that, I haven't had any caffeine in about 6 hours.

Janice and many like her believe that Christians are intolerant, because they think that all roads lead up the mountain to the same God at the top, right?

Rebecca Right.

Michael First of all, the Scriptures tell us that God has made a way for man to approach him, and only that way is appropriate. That way is Jesus Christ. All other ways are counterfeits of man's own devising that lead to a distraction from the truth. That's what the Scriptures tell us. Now, Janice's position is more arrogant, because she supposes that she is capable from her elevated vantage point to see the entirety of the mountain, which implies that she has a God's-eye-view of the whole mountain. We dirty dogmatists are on the mountain, so we can't possibly see with the clarity that she sees. How enlightened of her! I wish I had that elevated vantage point.

It really comes down to the fact that there is no way for her to know that all roads lead to the top. Additionally, she is merely spouting another dogma. She is merely masking it in tolerant, spiritual-sounding language. It's a smokescreen.

We as Christians didn't "figure it out" better than everyone else. The truth of access to God was *revealed* to us. That is why I can say that Christians are much less arrogant and intolerant than her and those like her.

Rebecca I see what you mean. That is a pretty clever argument, Michael. You still have to deal with those who contend that there is no mountain.

Fred Hey, I like that mountain! I don't know about Michael's dismissal of that idea. I mean, pluralism is the zeitgeist of our culture. Are you saying that everyone that promotes pluralism is wrong?

Michael Yes.

Fred How can that many people be wrong? They're not all stupid.

Michael Fred, believing in the truth is not a matter of intellectual giftedness. If that were the case, then you would have found the truth long before me. Believing the truth is primarily ethical. I hate to keep pointing you back to the statement you made to me at Maxwell's, but you encapsulated the real dilemma rather nicely when you stated that your ultimate reason for unbelief was a felt need for sex.

Fred Well I love sex!

Michael That much has been established.

Rebecca Oops! I think that Janice is drunk, and I think it's my turn on babysitting duty this evening. Michael, I'd love to pick your brain a bit more about this mountain stuff. Remember that we still need to finish our discussion about your "sin theory." Our conversation was interrupted by the very drunk Janice.

Michael Well, if you want we can discuss this more at another time. It was a pleasure as always to see you Rebecca. I'll be sure to come find you before I leave, so I can say goodbye.

I don't know about you guys, but I could use another beer.

Fred Indeed.

Waitress Two more, guys?

Michael Yes, please.

Waitress Name on the tab?

Michael Forth. (Turning to Fred)

You got rather silent. Didn't have anything to add or couldn't get a word in edge-wise?

Fred Mostly the latter. You know Rebecca, always rapid fire. But I do have a question for you. Are you happier? You seem more contented than before. You used to be so unhappy all the time. Is it age or is it this Christianity stuff?

Michael Fred, let me answer your question with a question. What makes you

happy?

Fred I've read enough Platonic dialogues not to step into that trap.

Michael Fair enough. I'll answer your question. Yes, I am happier, but more than that I have joy. My life has meaning and purpose now, and that is what I was missing. Where do you personally derive your meaning and purpose?

Fred Michael, can we pick up this conversation at lunch tomorrow or something? I'm getting a bit drunk, and this is a lot to take in.

Michael Sure, lunch tomorrow. My treat.