



Magic, Morals and Health: Plus 40 Years

Michael Young and Robert F. Valois

Dr. Warren Johnson may be best known for *Human Sexual Behavior and Sex Education: With Historical, Legal, Linguistic, and Cultural Perspectives*,¹ the book he co-authored with Edwin Belzer, Jr. It is not the type of book that is typically used today in sexuality courses, which often focus exclusively on content. Although the term “sex education” is in the title, the book is neither a methods text for teachers, nor is it a curriculum for students. This book is an interesting mix of factual information (some of the historical background Dr. Johnson provides is not found in other textbooks) and philosophical musings regarding sexuality, sexual behavior and the role of sex education in American society in the late 1960s.

In the article “Magic, Morals and Health” the reader is treated to Dr. Johnson’s thoughts about health and society, and the role of health educators. If you stay with Dr. Johnson’s train of thought, you will find he is concerned that: (1) A large segment of society tends to base at least some of their beliefs about health on mysticism or religious beliefs/teachings rather than science; (2) Too often health educators do not base their practice on good science, but instead attempt to impose their own moral/religious beliefs on others in the name of health; and (3) If health education is to have a future as a “major academic discipline” it must be based on sound science.

Dr. Johnson’s concerns, voiced 40 years ago, are currently relevant. Today our society

is dealing with a number of health related controversies, for example: abstinence education, contraceptive availability, abortion, environmental protection, gay rights, HIV/AIDS, immunizations, living wills and other end of life options, war, and health care reform. In all of these controversies there are people who take strong positions. Often these positions are based on ideology (sometimes religiously based, sometimes not), rather than sound reasoning, good science and accurate information. In recent years, especially under the George W. Bush administration, it seems that science has often been trumped by religious ideology.

People have an unalienable right to their own beliefs regarding religion and morals, and religion and health. The “Founding Fathers” addressed this issue in the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution stating “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof....”² While people do have freedom of religion, sound public policy and sound health policy, must be based on accurate information and what research suggests is effective for the future. We do not live in a theocracy.

Health educators have a professional obligation to present their clients with accurate information. Educators should not twist information in an attempt to make it fit their own religious belief (or non-belief) system or promote their own religious beliefs (or lack of beliefs). However, we believe that

Dr. Johnson would agree that understanding the background for certain religious teachings that have health implications is important. As one example, let us consider the biblical story of Onan which Dr. Johnson mentions in his article (Genesis 38:6-10, not Leviticus).

The short story is as follows: Er marries Tamar. Er is evil, so God kills him. Younger brother Onan then marries Tamar to “raise up seed” to his dead brother. Onan has sex with Tamar, but “spills his seed upon the ground.” God kills Onan; end of story. No explanatory comments are provided. This story has been used to attack masturbation, as well as any other sexual behavior that does not have the potential to result in procreation. It appears to be the origin of the Roman Catholic ban on artificial (non-natural) birth control.

We can dismiss the story as a nonsensical Hebrew fairy-tale, or we can try to understand the contextual background and what is really happening in the story. Why did Onan marry Tamar? Why did he spill his seed upon the ground (e.g. practice

Michael Young is a professor in Health Science, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, N.M. 88003; E-mail: myoung@nmsu.edu. Robert F. Valois is a professor in the Department of Health Promotion, Education, and Behavior, Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C. 29208.



withdrawal)? Why was he killed? Under the Jewish law of levirate marriage, Onan was to marry his brother's widow and have a child by her. The child, however, would not be his child, but his dead brother's child. Onan had sex with his new wife, but did not want to impregnate her. Why? Inheritance. Back in the day, when inheritance was divided, it was divided equally among the dead man's sons, except the eldest son always received a double portion. Onan's father, Judah, had three sons. Onan was the middle son. When Judah died, the inheritance would be divided four ways. Onan and his younger brother would each get a quarter of the estate. Their older brother, Er, would get half. Since Er had died, Onan is in line to get the double portion, which, since there are now only two sons, will be two-thirds of the estate. If Onan has a child with his dead brother's widow, however, that child would receive Er's double portion. Onan was looking at the difference between two-thirds and one-fourth of what would probably be a very large estate. Onan didn't mind marrying Tamar or having sex with her, but he did not want these actions to cost him money. Thus, the reason for Onan's death was not simply because he spilt his seed upon the ground. It also involved greed.

How was this story transformed into a prohibition on non-natural contraception, masturbation and other sexual behavior? It was, in large part, the work of an early Christian father, theologian and scholar, St.

Augustine. Augustine confirmed that it was Onan's attempt to prevent contraception that resulted in his death: "For it is illicit and shameful for a man to lie with even his lawful wife in such a way as to prevent the conception of offspring. This is what Onan, son of Judah, used to do; and for that God slew him."³ How could one man have this type of influence?

After the fall of the Roman Empire there was a period of general illiteracy. Reading and writing were largely confined to monasteries (comprised of men) and thus under the control of the Church. Because few people had access to the Bible, and fewer still could actually read the Bible for themselves, the words of St. Augustine and other Church fathers went unquestioned. Gradually their words became unquestionable; and accepted as the absolute truth. Believers do not need to think for themselves. One who questions authority is clearly not a believer. The moral of the story is that in examining mystical or religious beliefs, perhaps we should explore a little deeper and grasp the whole story.

Finally, Dr. Johnson was concerned that health education be based on sound science. This concern is relevant to health education in 2010. What we teach in the classroom must be based on sound biological and behavioral science. We must also become the scientists who produce the knowledge that is imparted in classrooms.

There is an effort on the part of the profession to encourage potential employers to

hire health education specialists. One of the best ways to promote the hiring of health educators is to demonstrate over and over through research published in top professional journals, that interventions designed, implemented and evaluated by well-trained health educators result in positive changes in health behavior and improved health status. If those of us who are college- and university-level health education faculty, are productive scholars, highly regarded for our research, our students who work with us in these efforts, that often document the effectiveness of health education, should have no problem securing employment.

Dr. Johnson's "Magic, Morals and Health" was written 40 years ago. It was relevant to the health education profession then, but one can also still find some wisdom in it that is relevant today.

REFERENCES

1. Johnson WR, Belzer EG Jr. *Human Sexual Behavior and Sex Education: With Historical, Moral, Legal, Linguistic, and Cultural Perspectives*, 3rd ed. Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1973.
2. The Constitution of the United States, Amendment I.
3. St. Augustine, cited in Beilisario MJ. Catholic Champion Blog, August 31, 2009. Available at: <http://catholicchampion.blogspot.com/2009/08/genesis-38-and-sin-of-onan.html>. Accessed September 10, 2009.