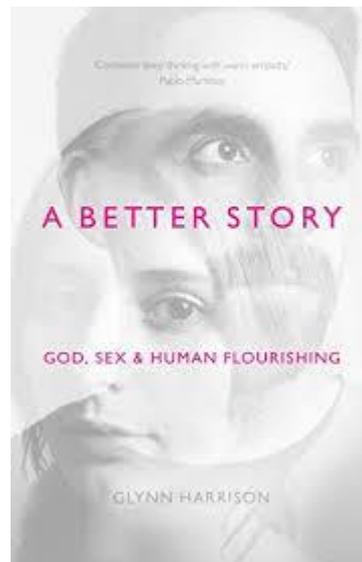


Book Review

Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story – God, Sex and Human Flourishing*, IVP UK, 2017, ISBN 978-1-78359-446-7, 219 pp incl notes and bibliography.

Reviewed by Ian Hore-Lacy, July 2018.

This is a very credible exposition of how the sexual revolution from the 1960s has at several levels changed the entire social and cultural context in the West. The author suggests that the revolution has been energised by Christians' asceticism and often incompetent portrayal of God's design of sex, and accordingly has some positive aspects for those previously marginalised. Its major negative consequences are made clear too. The book outlines how the revolution has gathered momentum to isolate Christians as a cultural minority, and some implications.



Harrison shows that Christian discipleship today means being part of a worldview and moral minority rather than any longer representing the cultural mainstream with institutional privilege, and for many this is a hard adjustment. But worse is the increasing chorus of derision and even antagonism where we are seen as an intolerant minority due to our different beliefs. Both our convictions and lifestyle need to be actively nurtured, with the need to maintain both empathy and well-based principles.

The salient feature of the sexual revolution is radical individualism, skilfully harnessed, which showed Western people how to think differently about right and wrong, and more so, to feel differently about it. Given that all of us respond to moral questions by intuition more than intellect, he explores how a spectrum of principles guide us. They range from those appealing to empathy across to social conservatism. But he challenges the reader by pointing out that these intuitions, based on feeling, can be a lazy cop-out from thinking clearly, and are vulnerable to emotional conditioning.

In relation to sexual morality all this has pushed the social consensus to the empathetic end of the spectrum, carried along by a plausible liberal narrative, and Christians have lacked any language to address this from a position of sacred principles. Harrison points out that “you

can't out-fact a story. You need to tell a different story – a better story.” But Hollywood has it sewn up, we don't.

Christians need to show that they are in possession of something better than the radical individualism and its messy consequences. It must “be seen in authentic sacrificial lives of beauty and persuasive power” as well as engaging with the ideas. Furthermore, “in contrast to the revolution's narrative, the Christian faith is rooted in the repudiation of self-reliance, it is a far-reaching submission to a Hero bigger than 'me'.”

Coming under pressure as a minority, the Christian community is under strain, and Harrison perceptively observes that “The first people to leach out of the minority are those with more empathetic personality types. They feel the emotional exclusion more strongly” and are drawn to the liberal sexual zeitgeist. “Those that remain tend to be more black-and-white personality types, who also tend to circle the wagons around authoritarian figures. This alienates any remaining empathetic types further,” and the result is a rump devoid of credibility. The attrition of millennial empaths from evangelicalism is marked, in my observation.

Turning to the sexual theme of the book, the author contends “that the vast majority of Christians have entered the experience of being made sexual in ignorance and fear. In shame.” Accordingly we are flat-footed in addressing the powerful ideology and moral claims of the sexual revolution which readily win hearts and minds. So we need a better critique – addressed in part 2 of the book, and a better story – in part 3.

Harrison notes that the culture of marriage has collapsed in poorer communities but has endured quite well among those better off. The fallout from this collapse is huge. “Divorce isn't the biggest threat for kids today, it's the seemingly unstoppable rise of cohabitation.” Failing marriages ending in divorce account for 20% of family break-ups, 80% are cohabiting families. He quotes UK figures estimating that 48% of all children born today will not be living with both natural parents by age 16, an increase from 40% estimated ten years ago.

We already know that pornography is the main means of sex education today, but fail to appreciate the significance of its hedonistic message about the self-serving meaning of sex. Ubiquitous porn is attributed much more to electronic media than the sexual revolution as such.

But, he asserts, “as the revolution got under way, our cowardly inability to articulate an alternative vision of sexual flourishing remains a continuing source of shame: it is we who have been weighed in the balance and found wanting.” So part 3 starts with addressing what

it means to be human, in tune with created reality, and recognising that “the formation of close, stable, bonded relationships sits at the heart of our experience of being human.” Furthermore, “sexual desire is our inbuilt homing instinct for the Divine, a kind of navigation aid showing us the way home.” Our sexual desires show the passionate nature of God’s love for us and need to be affirmed with joy accordingly.

“Marriage is an icon of God’s faithfulness” and put “on display for all the world to see.” “A couple celebrating their wedding anniversary actually offer a stronger picture of God’s love than a couple getting married.” Chaste singleness is also affirmed as bearing witness to God’s love in an eschatological perspective. Further chapters deal with flourishing in context of family and church.

“Our narrative must connect with the individualistic, compassion-driven morality of today’s culture, while managing to communicate something about the importance of the big principles which safeguard the many as well as the few.” In our storytelling we need to use “media that will engage with our culture and capture the imagination.” When competing with Hollywood we need “a new generation of Christian artists producing a range of visually-engaging materials.” But the challenge is not straightforward!

In my view Harrison overstates the influence of Christian ethics in causing a reaction to boost the sexual revolution, but he has useful perspectives on where Christians should see themselves culturally now and the need to promulgate a positive view of sex and marriage. Broadly, he suggests combining the Benedict Option and the Wilberforce Option as a way forward.

About the Reviewer

Ian Hore-Lacy is an Australian nuclear industry communicator, author and advocate for nuclear power in Australia. He works as a Senior Research Analyst at the World Nuclear Association, London. His particular interests range from the technical to the ethical and theological aspects of mineral resources and their use, especially nuclear power. He has written several books including *Responsible Dominion - a Christian approach to Sustainable Development*.