

THE MORAL WASTELAND

You may not think this a pretty story, but there it is.

During a serious symposium on sexual practices held in San Francisco recently, two practitioners of S and M were presented. "S and M" stands for sadism and masochism; and refers to sexual expression by way of whips, thongs and other painful instruments.

Not long ago, we took for granted that such practices were not only immoral- but so far outside the limits as to be prima facie evidence of mental illness. There were no public arguments to the contrary.

At this symposium, however, the two practitioners held that S and M sexuality was just another "alternative life style." Well, you all know what that means. Once something is anointed an "alternative life style," any attack on it is automatically deemed in certain quarters to be stuffy, bigoted and fascist.

The two proponents explained how good it was for society that S and M was coming out of the closet; that Hitler had persecuted the S and M set in Germany; and that Nazism would probably have failed if S and M had not been a taboo. Someone suggested that S and M was probably the last sexual taboo to topple; but someone else noted that, no, there was more taboo left to be toppled: incest.

That public discussion, not being alone, deserves to be taken seriously. Such practices have always existed; but they have normally been hidden. They were practices out of sickness; they were hidden out of shame. Since they were so

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universally considered immoral and shameful, they were practices only by the sick.

While it is symptomatic of a general moral lassitude that such fringe groups can unashamedly parade themselves as an "alternative life style," there is an opposite tendency simultaneously at work. An increasing mass of Americans have begun to feel a deep revulsion against such radical flouting of traditional moral standards.

Too many of the Americans who feel such revulsion find refuge in evangelical, sometimes extremist religions. Too many of the liberal mainstream religious groups are so fearful of being considered "stuffy, bigoted and fascist" that they do not dare take up old-fashioned arms against moral turpitude among consenting adults.

In short, because we abandon the field, we tend to leave the moral crusade to those who would use it too zealously or for too-narrow purposes. As a result we get the puritanical, pietistic backlash that we deserve. In the currently gathering backlash, there is the usual effort to have organized religion wash back over government - the ultimate problem, of course, being: which organized religion?

One clue is the fact that the U.S. Senate recently passed the Helms Amendment which would deny to all federal courts the authority to review the constitutionality of "voluntary" public school prayers. And the House of Representatives also passed a school prayer amendment, as part of the Department of Education Bill.

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You may wish to write your Congressman about these prayer bills. Movements towards government religion are not healthy, especially for Jews. But remember that the drive towards government-imposed morality is going to be strong, unless private mainstream religious groups become more outspoken in fighting the deterioration of personal moral standards.