



LICKS#7 (February 1993) is written and produced by Rob Hansen of 144 Plashet Grove, East Ham, London E6 1AB, UK., for the 222nd FAPA mailing. © Rob Hansen, 1993.

SECULAR PURITANISM

One of the things I've always loathed about organised religions is the way they lay down the law about what you can and cannot do. As an atheist, I view organised religions as systems of social control, and though I respect the right of anyone to willingly submit to such systems however foolish such submission might seem to me, I find it totally intolerable when those who have done so then try to force everyone else to abide by their moral code. If they want to follow the tenets of their chosen faith that's fine. What isn't fine is when they try to force them on those who don't, when they try to get laws passed telling consenting adults what they may and may not do in private, when they force schools to remove works from their libraries that they deem as being in any way non-Christian, when they burn books and records, and when they stop sex education in schools, denying children the knowledge that might save them from dying of AIDS in the naive belief that this will prevent those children from having pre-marital sex. When they commit this last act, they're also guilty of criminal stupidity. Such people are a direct threat to me and to all that I love and value, agents of darkness and ignorance representing all that is ugly and mean-spirited in our species, and I oppose them utterly. Unfortunately, the impulse to tell others how they may or may not live their lives (backed up by legislation where possible) is not restricted to the religious right.

There has always been a streak of puritanism in the left since the left, like the right, is a coalition of interests rather than a unified force, with some of those interests coexisting uneasily. What one might term the 'hedonists', the believers in 'free love' and the like, have always been frowned upon by those who, while liberal on all the important social issues, remain pruders and who view such behaviour as decadent. However, the impulse to tell others how to conduct their personal lives is obviously a deep-seated one and, though less bound by religious stricture than their counterparts on the right, there are those on the left who, while liberal in many ways, have found reasons to justify attacks on the lifestyles of their fellow citizens. These people, the 'secular puritans' as I think of them, have become increasingly vocal in recent years and we've all come across examples of their intolerance. I've identified what I think are the main 'commandments' of Secular Puritanism:

1. Thou shalt not smoke.
2. Thou shalt not eat meat.
3. Thou shalt not drink alcohol.
4. Thou shalt not have pornography.
5. Thou shalt not express any thought that could be construed as being in any way offensive to anyone else.
6. Thou shalt not indulge in SM (sadoomasochistic) sex.
7. Thou shalt not be fat.

The glee with which the right leapt on 'political correctness' should have clued the left in to the fact that they were shooting themselves in the foot with this one. Save only for considerations of national security, and of the laws of libel & slander (about which I have my doubts), the right to freedom of expression has to be absolute if it is to have any meaning at all. Those who claim to be in

favour of freedom of expression except when they find the ideas being expressed offensive don't really believe in it at all. No-one, but no-one, has the right not to be offended. It's easy to defend the right of free expression of those you agree with, but the test of your commitment to the principle lies in whether or not you would defend the right of free expression of those whose ideas you find threatening and offensive. When it comes to intellectual damage being done, there's little difference between enforcing speech codes and burning books.

One of the sadder developments of the past decade or so in this regard is the way the feminist movement has split down the middle over the subject of pornography, diverting a lot of energy that could be more productively spent elsewhere. On the one side are those who hold the view that "pornography is the theory, rape is the practice" and are trying to get it banned (an aside: the men who claim they were inspired to commit their crimes because of their reading are as likely to claim it was The Bible that inspired them, yet no-one is calling for that to be banned), while on the other are those who maintain that all the research done to date has failed to prove a link between sexual violence and pornography, that the very last thing we need to do is give our governments even more powers to censor what we see and read, and that even if we did they wouldn't use it against the high-circulation glossies put out by conglomerates with clout. (This contention has been borne out by the first application of such a law in Canada, which was against a small-circulation magazine of lesbian erotica, produced by women for women.) In this country, one of the main groups taking the latter view is Feminists Against Censorship, and Avedon is one of its leading lights. The left as a whole over here, however, seems to have bought into the former view and the Labour party supports the legislation proposed by people such as Andrea Dworkin and Michael Moorcock. And yet, the alleged link between pornography and violence has yet to be proved by any properly conducted study, as was admitted in a report on this issue recently published by the British Government itself.

It might be supposed that people who have supported gay rights and, indeed, gays themselves would support the principle that what consenting adults choose to do with each other sexually should be their own concern and no-one else's, but such is sadly not the case. No, it's only their own concern if the sexual activities those consenting adults choose to engage in are deemed to be politically correct, something SM is most emphatically not. Some years ago over here, a meeting of SM lesbians was violently broken up by a group of lesbians, wearing ski-masks, who were opposed to SM. This latter group opposed what they would claim was the way SM eroticises violence, yet they were the ones who used violence. They would doubtless also have supported the claim that SM fetishises the enforced subordination of women, yet they were the ones wearing the ski-masks so often favoured by rapists, the enforcers of the most brutal form of that subordination. They are members of a community too often oppressed because of its sexual preferences, yet they in turn oppressed a smaller group within that community for their sexual preferences. I'm sure the irony of all this escaped them entirely. To those on the left who are prudish, SM represents hedonism at its most decadent and confirms all their worst fears, so it's not too surprising they would be unhappy about it and thus reticent about speaking out against recent judicial abuses over here of those who engage in SM.

One of the more surprising developments of the past fifteen years or so, to me at any rate, is the rise of what might be termed the 'militant vegetarianism' of the 'Meat is Murder' brigade. Once upon a time, the decision to be vegetarian was a personal choice arising from an aversion to eating animals rather than a holy crusade, but not any more it seems. I occasionally attend left-wing political events at which food is available, but these days meat is never included. It used to be that care was taken to ensure there were vegetarian choices available for those who didn't eat meat, but now it seems that meat

can't be offered at all lest its very presence offend them. Well, fuck that. Again, no-one has the right not to be offended. Surely, it is not beyond the wit of the organisers of these events to provide meat behind a screened off section of the buffet table, one containing an admonition like those that appear before certain TV programmes: "Warning: Some people may find the following food offensive. People of a nervous disposition and those easily offended should not pass this point." Sounds reasonable to me, but I'm sure that anyone attempting to get at that food would probably find their way blocked by someone wearing a 'Meat Is Murder' T-shirt.

The speed at which anti-smoking ordinances are being passed at present is quite breathtaking. Yes, smoking is certainly harmful and those who smoke are undoubtedly being foolish, but since when was it a crime to be foolish? The ordinances are, of course, a consequence of the allegedly harmful effects of 'secondary smoking' on those near someone who is smoking. That there are harmful effects is far from conclusive as yet, but the possibility that there might be has already been used to provide the moral sanction required to legitimately transform dislike of smoking into anti-smoking coercion. The ordinances that have been passed usually seek to stop smoking in 'public places', which is reasonable enough if the health of non-smokers actually is at risk, but I'm a little puzzled at what is deemed to constitute a 'public place' in this regard. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought that most restaurants were privately owned establishments rather than 'public places', and as such it should surely be a matter for the proprietors alone to decide what proportion, if any, of their establishments they will make non-smoking based on their own business judgement and knowledge of their clientele? If you don't approve of their decision then you take your custom elsewhere. In the meantime, those adults who choose to smoke, however foolish, have every right to exercise their freedom of choice in this regard. With a little more consideration and a lot less hysteria on both sides it should be possible for smokers and non-smokers to co-exist peacefully. Incidentally, lest anyone assume otherwise, I hereby raise my right hand and do most solemnly declare that I am not now, nor have I ever been, a smoker.

Save for alcoholics, and those idiots who drink and drive, there's no reason why anyone shouldn't enjoy a few drinks. Hell, in small quantities alcohol is actually good for you. Nonetheless, there are those to whom any use is abuse and those to whom any substance that gives pleasure to people is automatically suspect. To be fair, there isn't yet as strong a tide against drinking as there is against, say, smoking, and those who oppose it must surely be given pause by the disaster that was Prohibition. Before the enactment of the Prohibition laws there were something like four hundred brewers and distillers in the US; after repeal there were just four, these having survived by making alcohol for medicinal and industrial use under government license in the meantime. Interestingly, these survivors had secretly bankrolled the main temperance groups that had got Prohibition enacted in the first place. You may draw your own conclusions from this, but far worse than any governmental corruption and partisan collusion with business interests, of course, was the way that Prohibition allowed organised crime to develop the financial base that has made it the powerful force it is in America today. For all their good (but, to my mind, misguided) intentions, those dupes in the temperance groups were paving that well-trodden path to Hell.

Despite the idealised images of trim bodies beamed at us by Hollywood and the ad agencies, it's always seemed to me that the real reason that so many people frown on those who are fat is not primarily because of their failure to conform to these images but because of what those doing the frowning see as an inability on the part of the fat to control their appetites. At least a part of the disapproval is down to prudery again, the delight the fat are thought to take in

food being viewed as evidence of moral laxity in the same way as is the lack of guilt on the part of those who make no secret of their exuberant enjoyment of sex. The problem here, of course, is that there's no uniform correlation between the amount someone eats and their girth. Certainly there are those who are the shape they are because of how much they eat, but your genes are far more important in determining your body shape. Which is why you can experience real cognitive dissonance when you hear someone who wouldn't dream of making insulting remarks about a person's race or gender being derogatory about their being fat when it may be just as much a matter of genetic predetermination. So it goes.

There's an unfortunate tendency on the left to believe in the perfectability of humanity, and an even more unfortunate tendency among some of those who believe this that it can be achieved through legislation and the coercion of social pressure. However, just because you're a thin, sexually conservative, teetotal, vegetarian anti-smoker it doesn't mean that you have any more of a lock on virtue than someone who is none of these things. Remember, Hitler was all of them, but few us would (I hope) hold him up as an ideal citizen. The idea that what constitutes a virtuous lifestyle can even be agreed, let alone legislated upon, is obvious nonsense. This is an area that both religious and secular busybodies should keep their noses out of, but they won't of course. Others may choose to live their lives in a radically different fashion to how you choose to live yours, but that doesn't necessarily make them less worthy citizens than you and shouldn't make them any sort of threat to you unless you're the sort of person who only feels comfortable with enforced conformity. The peaceful acceptance of diversity seems to me to be one of the basic standards of a mature and civilised society. Unfortunately, it's one that both our countries are increasingly failing to meet. Intolerance is on the march.

Afterword: I'm sure that some people are going to respond to this piece by writing: "I agree with you on A, B, and C, but surely you're not serious about X, Y, and Z?" Well, yes, actually, I am. I don't much care for some of the things listed myself (and, no, I'm not telling you which), but then that's the whole point. Whether I like them myself or not I really don't think I have the right to tell others how to live their lives. And I don't think our leaders do either. Incidentally, I've only identified seven 'commandments' of secular puritanism above. How long before we reach the traditional ten, I wonder?

IT'S A GAS!:

The following is a news item I just had to share with you since it demonstrates your tax dollars at work:

"The US Government has 32 billion cubic feet of helium stored beneath 20 square miles of Texas Panhandle in case of an outbreak of blimp warfare. Established by Congress in 1929, when blimps were expected to be the war machines of the future, the National Helium Reserves were renewed in 1960 and ordered to boost stockpiles of the lighter-than-air gas. In 1973, Congress decided the nation had enough helium to keep US blimps in the air and ordered the Bureau of Mines, which runs the program, to maintain the existing supply. The program is budgeted to cost \$22 million to operate in 1993. Even though it expects to cover this sum by selling off small amounts of helium to other government agencies, since it borrowed money to start the operation and buy the helium, the debt now exceeds \$1 billion and annual interest payments are almost \$130 million."

This seems like a lot of money but, truly, who could put a price on the ability of Mr and Mrs America to sleep soundly in their beds, secure in the knowledge that the US is safe from attack by blimps? I know I couldn't. 3 Jan 93.