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# A Sex Abuse Panic?

By Richard Cohen

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Harris Mirkin, PhD and associate professor at the University of Missouri, is in a spot of trouble. Back in 1999 he published an article in which he characterized the concern over pedophilia as a "moral panic" and questioned the concept of the "innocent child." As if to prove him right, the state legislature took \$100,000 out of the university's budget -- a penalty for having the temerity of independent thought. If Mirkin has any more, the university could go broke.

Predictably enough, various Missouri politicians denounced pedophilia and all sorts of child abuse. One in particular, Don Lograsso, a Republican, declared that "sex between adults and children is not acceptable" -- a thought that may well not have occurred to anyone before.

But I have actually read the Mirkin article, published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* (Volume 37, Number 2) and can find no endorsement of sex between adults and children. I can, however, find an interesting discussion of the changing views about childhood sexuality and the concept of childhood innocence. Maybe it is this that so riled the legislature.

Childhood sexuality is not my area of expertise. But I can detect the scent of panic that overcomes us all when, from time to time, we sense our children are in danger. Whether it is the overstated crisis of kidnapped children (remember those milk cartons?), reports of satanic rituals and abuse, murder or abuse by strangers or the fear that within every day care center lurked a pedophile, we tend from time to time to lose our minds where kids are involved. For the little ones we are willing to throw away our common sense and our civil liberties -- and live in the land of the lurid.

Now the country is once again in a panic about the sexual abuse of children -- this time by Catholic priests. No doubt there's a problem and no doubt, too, this problem has been covered up by prelates who long ago should have quit

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in shame. But the fact remains that just about everything from the merely inappropriate to the downright heinous has been conflated into a single term -- sexual abuse -- and has been made to seem equally serious.

What's more, not only is all inappropriate contact treated as abuse -- a word of great, lasting power -- but all the victims are considered children. There's a vast difference, however, between a 17-year-old and an 8-year-old. In some cases, between a boy and girl -- especially, say, a boy of 17 who's being "abused" by a woman slightly his senior. Distinctions ought to be made.

This is the point in the column where I am obliged to state, for the record and before God, that I do not approve of adult-child sex. Anyone who has read me over the years knows this. These kinds of relationships almost always entail an abuse of authority. In the case of priests, because the authority is linked to God, it makes the betrayal so much worse.

But we have to proceed with caution. In the first place, as Mirkin says, the idea of the innocent child is a recent development. Previous generations not to mention Freud himself, saw the child as a sexual being. Now, though, children are seen the way the Victorians once saw women -- as "innocent and non-sexual," in Mirkin's words.

The current misperception about children has its consequences. A child who has sexual urges may later create a memory of something that never happened. These so-called repressed memories have resulted in virtual witchcraft trials in which adults are accused of wholly imagined crimes. It goes like this: If the child is sexually innocent, then the adult must be sexually guilty. After all, the innocent, the pure, could not have concocted such a sordid tale.

I am not saying that there is no such thing as repressed memory or that all accusations of sexual abuse are false. I am only saying that there is much we do not know and, as a consequence, there is a great need for caution and specificity. What we need more of are precisely the sort of iconoclastic articles that Mirkin has written. Yet he and Judith Levine, a journalist who has written a provocative book about childhood sexuality, have been lambasted as perverts rather than engaged in debate.

Child molestation is heinous, an abomination. But there is not all that much of

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it, and it is not all the same. At the same time, censorship and demagoguery, not to mention the defamation and incarceration of innocent people, are also abominations. Despite what some will tell you, we don't have to choose.

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"It is therefore of  
immense importance to  
men to have fixed ideas  
about God, their souls,  
and their duties toward  
their Creator and their  
fellows, for doubt about  
these first principles  
would leave all their  
actions to chance and  
condemn them, more or  
less, to anarchy and  
impotence"

Alexis de Toqueville

*Democracy in America 1838*