



NEWS ARCHIVE

Hefner: 'I'm a pretty moral guy'

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BY [CATHLEEN FALSANI](#) Religion Reporter

LOS ANGELES -- When Hugh Hefner prays, which he admits is not with any regularity, he says his conversation with the Creator usually goes something like this:

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"Thank you, Lord."

Outside, several flamingos stroll unfettered across the Playboy Mansion's expansive backyard and a giant peacock rests on a low tree branch, while a pajama-clad Hefner, 78, seated on a comfy couch in the library, reflects on his life and what he says are its many blessings.

"If life is a card game, I got the winning hand, and most people have only a small idea of how really good it is," he says, his face folding into a wide, easy smile. "Usually, you know, our religious values suggest you have to pay the fiddler, that if you get a lot of good breaks, there has to be something wrong with it, and usually there is."

HUGH MARSTON HEFNER

Age: 78

Raised: Methodist

Now: Enthusiastic humanist

Attends: Doesn't

Words to live by: "I urge one and all to live this life as if there is no reward in the afterlife, and do it in a moral way that makes it better for you and for those around you and leaves this world a little better place than when you found it."

"Not to suggest that my life hasn't been full of trials and tribulations. Of course, it has. It wouldn't be a life without it. But I know how lucky I am," Hefner says during an hourlong conversation about his spirituality. He feels "blessed to be a part of it, blessed to be alive to celebrate this existence, and to celebrate in a way that makes existence better for others, and that is the best of what religion is. That's the good part."

Despite what he calls a "typical Midwestern Puritan" upbringing

-- and Hefner, a 10th-generation direct descendant of Mayflower passenger William Bradford, uses the term "Puritan" quite specifically -- the Playboy baron's

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own spirituality is decidedly unconventional.

Call it The Playboy Theology.

Hefner doesn't believe in a "biblical God," but he is fairly adamant about the existence of a "Creator."

He hasn't been to a church service that wasn't a wedding, funeral or baptism since he was a college student at the University of Illinois in the late 1940s, but he says he worships on a regular basis in his own backyard.

And he follows a system of morals, but not those gleaned from the Methodism of his childhood -- at least not the ones that pertain to sexuality.

"I think sex is there for procreation and a good deal more," says Hefner, who is clad in his trademark black-and-red satin smoking-jacket-and-slippers ensemble, at home on the Gothic estate in Los Angeles' Holmby Hills neighborhood that he shares with his girlfriends Holly Madison, Bridget Marquardt and Kendra Wilkinson. All three women are in their 20s.

"I was raised in [a religious tradition in] which sex was only there for procreation and the rest was sin. And that excluded not only a whole lot of behavior, but also a whole lot of people. That's abominable," he says. "Religion was a very important part of my upbringing. I saw in it a quality in terms of ideals, and a morality that I embraced. I also saw parts of it, related to human sexuality and related to other things, that I thought were hypocritical and hurtful. And I think they are the origins of who I am. I think the heart of who I am is a result of that -- trying to make some sense of all of that."

Hefner grew up in Chicago, the elder of two sons born to Grace and Glenn Hefner. His father was an accountant with whom he says he spent little time as a child.

Dearth of affection

"It was the Depression, and he was away before I got up and often was not back before I went to sleep when I was young, so we only saw him on weekends," Hefner says of his father. "Our family was Prohibitionist, Puritan in a very real sense. Never smoked, swore, drank, danced. All the good stuff. Or hugged. Oh, no. There was absolutely no hugging or kissing in my family.

"There was a point in time when my mother, later in life, apologized to me for not being able to show affection. That was, of course, the way she was raised," he says. "I said to her. 'Mom, you couldn't have done it any better. And because of the things you weren't able to do, it set me on a course that changed my life and the world.'

"When I talk about the hurt and the hypocrisy in some of our values and our sexual values, it comes from the fact that I didn't get hugged a lot as a kid, and I understand that."

While his mother was steadfastly Puritanical, Hefner says she wasn't particularly dogmatic.

"We had to go to church every Sunday, but she let us try other churches," he says. "We went to a Congregational church for a while, which is similar to Methodist. I went a couple of times to a Christian Scientist church because I had a crush on a girl in high school who was a Christian Scientist. I went to Catholic church on a number of occasions with my first wife because she was Catholic."

In 1949, Hefner married his first wife, Millie Williams, at a parish on Chicago's Northwest Side. He can't recall the name of the parish, but he does remember vividly one maddening anecdote from his brush with Catholicism.

"Millie got very upset when she went to the doctor for birth control information and the doctor turned out to be Catholic and started singing, 'Rhythm is my business.' She was so affronted," Hefner says. That was the end of Hefner's connection, tenuous as it was, to the Catholic Church.

The couple, who divorced after 10 years of marriage, raised their children, David and Christie (who is now CEO of Playboy Enterprises), without any formal religious tradition.

His youngest children, sons Marston, 14, and Cooper, 13, who live with their mother, Hefner's second wife, Kimberly Conrad, on an estate adjacent to the Playboy Mansion, also are being reared without any formal religion. (Hefner and Conrad, Playboy's 1989 Playmate of the Year, married in 1989 and have been separated amicably since 1998.)

What has Hefner taught his children about religion and the existential mysteries of the universe?

"You start talking about evolution as something that's real. The wonder of evolution. Not the bull— of creationism," he says. And if they ask him about God, he'll describe a deity that he says he knows but doesn't encounter in the Bible.

"I believe in the creation, and therefore I believe there has to be a creator of some kind, and that is my God. I do not believe in a biblical God, not in the sense that he doesn't exist, it's just that I know rationally that man created the Bible and that we invented our perception of what we do not know," he says.

The Playboy morality

"I would believe in a God who created this world and also some more rational insights to make it better and would indeed give us an afterlife. An afterlife would be a really good deal. Yeah. I would vote in favor of that," he says. "But in the meantime, I urge one and all to live this life as if there is no reward in the afterlife and do it in a moral way that makes it better for you and for those around you and leaves this world a little better place than when you found it."

That last bit sums up Hefner's moral code.

Don't hurt anyone. Try to do the right thing. Make the world a better place.

He believes he has lived up to those morals, although he's keenly aware of the myriad people — many of them deeply religious — who would insist he has done the exact opposite by building an empire based on free sexuality and, some say,

the objectification of women.

Their image of him is simple: Hugh Hefner, sinner extraordinaire.

"Sin is a religious term for immoral behavior, but it's a religious term," Hefner says, adding that his definition of sin is "things that are hurtful to people."

Has he sinned?

"Oh, sure. But I haven't pursued very much immoral behavior. I'm a pretty moral guy. Now, it's morality as I perceive it. Morality is what is perceived as good for people," he says, smiling widely, but not in a mischievous way. "I try to do what's right . . . I define it in a way that is truly, what I believe to be truly humanistic and rational and loving.

"I have strong feelings about the way organized religion with the codification of all of the rules related to sexuality became law and played havoc with people's lives. I think that – dare I say it? – is very un-Christian."

Over the years, Hefner and his Playboy Foundation have financially supported research about human sexuality – such as Kinsey, and Masters and Johnson studies – as well as campaigns for reproductive rights.

They are moral pursuits, Hefner argues, despite what many religious leaders might say.

"I think this world is in great trouble," he says. "Overpopulation, destruction of the environment, war, bigotry, etc., and we are dealing with these major problems still like superstitious savages. And we're coming to a place where we cannot continue to do that.

"One needs real solutions to real problems. We need to deal with reality. And when religion helps in that regard, fine. And when it gets in the way, and sometimes it does, one needs to see the difference. Faith is not enough. One has to have faith in reason. Not faith in superstition."

Strange bedfellows

Back in the 1960s, when Hefner and Playboy Enterprises were involved with the civil rights movement and Playboy was in its heyday, he met an Episcopal priest and author named Malcolm Boyd. The two men have remained close friends for more than 40 years.

At the time, Hefner spent time with various clergymen, including the Rev. Jesse Jackson, with whom he could knock around his ideas about theology and morality. In fact, Hefner says, for a time Playboy magazine offered a special discount subscription rate for ministers.

"Hef is a seeker," says Boyd, 81, who lived briefly at the Playboy Mansion in Chicago in the mid-1960s and now is artist-in-residence at Los Angeles' Cathedral Center of St. Paul. "He's on an adventure in life, and it's at a very deep level a spiritual adventure. He's looking for meaning, for context, for answers. In fact, I think, with most people in situations he's trying to size them up in a kind of

spiritual dimension. I think most people would not know that.

"Hef is almost a fierce individualist, and I think as such a great many people have never really understood him," Boyd says. "He doesn't have a conformist image that people are invited to buy into. He's himself."

As such, Hefner has constructed a unique theology informed by eclectic sources. For instance, he says he learned his morality from popular movies as much as he did from his parents and their Puritanical Protestantism.

Filmmaker Frank Capra, director of "It's a Wonderful Life," among others, provided a bulwark for Hefner's spiritual ethos.

"I think the movies/were my other mentors, my other parents," he says. "It's where I escaped into dreams and fantasies and also provided a set of values that were immigrant dreams. In other words, what we call the American dream, dreams of democracy, etc.

"And it has become a universal dream, a dream of democracy, of personal, political and economic freedom for everybody. A right to live your life on your own terms as long as it doesn't hurt anybody."

A few steps away from the library in the Playboy Mansion is Hefner's screening room, where he shows movies from his private collection of more than 4,000 feature films several nights a week. It even has a full-size pipe organ like the ones found in the movie houses of his youth.

Friday night is Casablanca Night in the Playboy screening room, where Hefner shows his favorite classics, such as "Born Yesterday," the 1950 Judy Holliday film that he counts among the most spiritual films he has ever seen.

"It's about a woman who is a kept mistress of a corrupt guy who's trying to make a deal in Washington, played by Broderick Crawford. And in her rather Pygmalion relationship with a teacher, William Holden, she sees the world in a whole new way, and she is reborn in the real sense. That's a very spiritual film," Hefner says.

Another movie he finds spiritually inspiring is the 1942 film "The Male Animal," starring Henry Fonda and Olivia de Havilland. Fonda plays mild-mannered Midwestern University professor "Tommy Turner," whose job is threatened after he reads a controversial essay to his class that is perceived to be pro-communist.

"It has to do with conviction of belief beyond what is popular, and it had a tremendously moving impact on me," Hefner says. "When I talk about spiritual, that's what I'm talking about."

Worship, bunny style

When he thinks about how he might worship his creator God, the Playboy founder also talks about music – jazz musician Bix Beiderbecke, the Midwestern cornet player who drank himself to an early grave at age 28 in particular – and his backyard.

On the elaborately landscaped 5.7-acre grounds of the Playboy Mansion, which

include 50 coastal redwoods, the pool and, of course, the infamous "grotto," (a cavelike alcove off the main swimming pool that houses a series of hot tubs of varying depths and temperatures), Hefner has a zoo.

Squirrel monkeys, parrots, toucans and other exotic creatures live in a series of exhibits and aviaries only a few dozen yards from his back door.

"The animals we have here are a direct connection to my childhood and my love of animals . . . and my belief that we should be somehow living in harmony with nature, as the animals do."

The moments he says he feels perhaps closest to God have occurred while he has been walking his property alone.

"Some of my most spiritual moments, if I can call them that, come from walking through the forest, come from walking the backyard; feeling connected to the wonder of what this is all about," he says, his eyes wandering out a picture window to the rolling, bucolic grounds of the mansion.

"I think it brings your emotions to the surface to a level where you are just totally overwhelmed. Sometimes you know why and sometimes you don't. It touches you in places that are hidden sometimes, that are from very early childhood that are hurts, yearnings, and those are wonderful, magical, spiritual moments. And they can come sometimes from left field.

"I think a good walk in the woods is very revitalizing. . . . If you think you've got problems or something hurtful has happened, take a walk in the woods and think about how lucky you are just to be alive."

One of the regular stops on his back-yard strolls is a tabebuia, or trumpet tree, he planted near the tennis courts in honor of his mother, who died in 1997 at the age of 101.

"My life has been a quest for the world where the words to the song are true," Hefner says, smiling still with a hint of melancholy in his eyes. "It's an impossible, impossible quest. But there's that yearning, that dream. And that's what I mean by spiritual."