

A Humanist Response to the Controversy Surrounding Fifty Shades of Grey

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

There has been much controversy surrounding the upcoming (February 13, 2015) release of the film *Fifty Shades of Grey*, based on the best-selling book and its two sequels by the woman British author E.L. (Erika Leonard) James. The book and movie deal with BDSM or Bondage and Discipline/Sado-Masochism.

Critics of the film include many feminists, conservative, reactionary and authoritarian Christians, some BDSM proponents and others. Catholic leaders have taken a leading role in opposing the film. Richard J. Malone, the bishop of Buffalo, wrote a letter to other bishops blasting the film and claiming that one of the stars in the film is “agreeing to be abused and degraded in a sexual relationship.” Malone, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth, is just one of many critics that attacks the film as pornographic, an assault upon “the great dignity of women,” and an enticement to domestic violence against women.

It must be pointed out that Vintage has sold 100 million copies of the books. Mothers make up many of the books’ readers. (Some speak of the genre “mommy porn.”) According to an excellent article in the February 16, 2015 issue of *Time*, it is “one of the fastest-selling paperback series in history, besting even Harry Potter. ‘You need to read it. You need to do it now. And you need to wear a panty liner,’ one early fan, Jan Boudin of Melville, N.Y., was told by a friend.” (“The Grey Area: How the Movie *Fifty Shades of Grey* Set Out to Craft a Feminist Romance from a Novel of Sex, Violence and Domination,” by Belinda Luscombe, p. 40.) According to some reviewers, the movie differs from the book series. The director is a woman, 47-year-old feminist Sam Taylor-Johnson. Kelly Marcel and E.L. James wrote the script. The sex scenes in the film are not as explicit as the scenes in the books. Anastasia, the female protagonist, is more assertive and confident in the film. “The movie constructs a different dream, perhaps not quite as fantastical [as in the book series] that a woman can be fully in charge of her own destiny and choices and still go on a thrill ride.” (ibid. p. 44.)

Still, many critics claim that BDSM is by its nature degrading and harmful to women. Yet many women love being spanked, tied up, etc. by their male (or female) sex partners, and some women prefer to dominate the men (or women) in their lives sexually. Many women involved in BDSM experience intense orgasms. Have they simply been brainwashed by a sexist society to enjoy BDSM? Do women ever need permission or approval from anyone before they feel free to fulfill their sexual fantasies?

Some groups (such as AntiPornography.org and the National Center on Sexual Exploitation) and conservative, reactionary and authoritarian religionists – strange bedfellows – have formed a kind of unholy alliance in opposition to *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The Catholic bishops equate BDSM with abuse. However, to equate BDSM with abuse is like equating the sports of boxing, wrestling or mixed martial arts with illegal physical assault. It is the worst kind of false analogy. (Catholic priests have been called men who wear black dresses and shun sex with women. So perhaps they should be forgiven for not knowing the difference between consensual sexual role playing and sexual abuse.)

In the film, Anastasia asks, “Oh, how demeaning is this?” just before getting spanked. “Demeaning and scary and hot.” (ibid. p. 42.) Later, the article relates, “It took many women by surprise that they were fired up by the activities described as happening to Ana...having her movements restricted, being deprived of sight, becoming completely vulnerable to her partner....’But they don’t know what to make of being titillated.’” (ibid.)

Trying to dictate sexual desire is tricky business. “Desire strikes every woman differently...and since sex, like reading, is mostly about the theater of the mind, finding a universally arousing depiction of intimacy is damnably difficult.” (ibid. p. 44.) Indeed, rather than trying to establish models of sexuality, why cannot each individual decide for himself or herself what is sexually exciting and fulfilling, as long as it occurs among consenting adults?

Catholic leaders are extremely hypocritical on this issue. They talk a good game of respecting women. The problem is that they have never respected women as equals. There is a patriarchal conception of respect for women. They do not permit women to attain positions of genuine leadership in the Catholic Church. If they truly respect women, why can't they respect women's right to produce the literature and films of their choice?

In any event, those opposing the film are well within their rights to do so, as long as they do not resort to censorship. On the other hand, if I want to “degrade” myself sexually, I have that right. Why should that right not also be extended to women?