

Equal Time for Freethought
Interview with James W. Prescott by Arnell Dowret
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Transcribed by Joel Schlosberg

Arnell Dowret: Tonight, we begin the first of a two-part examination of the importance of becoming a body pleasure-positive culture, and just how far away from it we are.

Once we reject the supernatural worldview and its accompanying debasement of our experience as physical beings, and once we discard the parochial precepts of religion, is it reasonable to expect that our attitudes regarding bodily pleasure and sexuality would also change? One might think that among those who have successfully cast off the traditional shackles of the shame and guilt which religious teachings cause us to associate with bodily pleasure and sexuality, there would be a powerful shift in attitude and behavior. Surprisingly, however, as our guest tonight, Dr. James Prescott will tell us, this is hardly the case. Modern humanism and secular organizations are virtually indistinguishable from their religious counterparts when it comes to not promoting healthy body pleasure-positive attitudes; and even worse, they have refused to take a stand against the institutionalized infliction of pain on children.

We shall also learn from our distinguished guest [that] when it comes to rejecting pleasure and accepting pain, what's at stake for our society is far more than not having enough fun. Instead, Dr. Prescott will explain how his groundbreaking research documented that when a culture deprives children from the bodily pleasure, in terms of parental physical affection and indulgence, and later, if the culture is highly repressive toward sexual expression, the consequences are very serious, including a predisposition to a wide range of violent and other antisocial behaviors.

Before we begin our interview with Dr. Prescott, let's listen to this sound clip from a Canadian television documentary called "[Violence](#)". The documentary originally aired in November of 1976, and featured Dr. Prescott's groundbreaking work on the relationship between violent behaviors and deprivation of essential physical/developmental experiences.

James W. Prescott (in documentary): And what I found was, that the cultures which provided high infant physical affection were very low in physical violence as adults.

Documentary narrator: Dr. Prescott looked at 49 primitive cultures and found that by far the majority were peaceful. He found they treated their children with affectionate tolerance — the same tolerance they showed to adult sexuality. It was a different story in the tribes that were notoriously ferocious. They either treated their kids harshly, or their adults because of repressive sexual taboos. Prescott claims it's our Judaeo-Christian tradition that's responsible. Mortification of the flesh is good for us. Pain and punishment build character. Touching for physical pleasure is wrong. And that's the root of our distorted attitude to sex.

James W. Prescott (in documentary): We have legal authorities taking action against pornographic films; against massage parlors. It's right out of Corinthians. In contrast, we have a whole variety of films of sexual violence. And that isn't even touched. So we had *A Clockwork Orange*, *Straw Dogs*; we have many films of sexual violence, particularly rape, which can run in our neighborhood theaters and there is no objection by authorities for this kind of sexual violence. So it's not sexuality that is the issue. The issue is pleasure. Pleasure is immoral.

Arnell Dowret: Dr. James Prescott is a developmental and cross-cultural neuropsychologist. From 1963 to 1980, Dr. Prescott served as the National Institute of Child

Health and Human Development's science health administrator. During his tenure, Dr. Prescott conducted research which showed that in cultures where the natural human need to experience bodily pleasure was repressed or inhibited in mother/child relationships and later in the expression of adolescent sexuality, there was immeasurably stronger inclination toward violent behaviors than in cultures where such need for intimate contact were not repressed. But how did the federal government respond to Dr. Prescott's findings? Despite it being [mentioned](#) in Dr. Carl Sagan's famous book [Cosmos](#), why is Dr. Prescott's work today virtually unknown? And how has the present-day humanist establishment responded to Dr. Prescott's message?

To answer all of these and other questions, we're proud to welcome Dr. James Prescott to Equal Time for Freethought. Hello, Dr. Prescott!

James W. Prescott: Hello, Arnell.

Arnell Dowret: Thank you for joining us.

James W. Prescott: Thank you for having me.

Arnell Dowret: Yes.

Dr. Prescott, in the sound clip that we played, the reporter said that you cite our Judaeo-Christian tradition as the cause of our valuing pain and devaluing pleasure. Why is that?

James W. Prescott: Well, we have to go back to the animal studies of Harlow and his associates, in which they separated the infant from the mother and providing sensory deprivation, what we call somatosensory deprivation, of physical contact, body contact or body pleasure.

Arnell Dowret: So these were studies conducted by Harry Harlow, and they had separated infant monkeys from their mother to observe what the effects of that separation would be.

James W. Prescott: Yes, and of course, there are many primatologists who have studied mother/infant separation, and probably the most important study in that genre of studies is by Bill Mason, in which he demonstrated that you could virtually prevent all of the psychopathologies in maternal/infant separation if you reared the infant monkey on a *moving* mother surrogate, which was a Clorox bottle wrapped with fur, and it swung randomly in the horizontal plane, and up-and-down about six inches.

Arnell Dowret: So, when you say a "mother surrogate", just so we clarify for those listeners who might not be familiar with the mechanics of this, we're talking about something that you put in the cage of an infant who's been deprived of contact with the mother — and we're talking about an infant primate, now — something that would take the place of a mother, like a doll, but in this case we're talking about something that would be suspended on some kind of device that would enable it to swing freely, so you had a moving device, as opposed to, say, a stationary one.

James W. Prescott: Yes, and the stationary one was bolted to the floor. And that one change in the environment resulted in the virtual disappearance of the wide range of behavior pathologies that result from mother/infant separation. And so this is what led me to initiate the series of research studies with neuroscientists, neurobehavioral scientists, to document the effects on the brain. And it was found that the isolation-reared monkeys, the maternal/infant-reared separated monkeys, had impaired brain function. And these were studies conducted by Dr. Robert Heath initially, who was then chairman of the Department of Psychiatry and Neurology at Tulane — he's now deceased — and he embarked on a wide variety of brain development studies that implicated the cerebellum, which I was led to believe was involved from Bill Mason's studies of the moving surrogate.

Arnell Dowret: So your studies finally led you to conclude what?

James W. Prescott: Well, that maternal/infant bonding is absolutely essential for the normal growth and development of the brain and behavior, and is the primary cause of physically violent behavior.

Arnell Dowret: When it's deprived.

James W. Prescott: Yeah. And then that's what led me to the cross-cultural studies to determine whether that really could be demonstrated at the human primate level. And I discovered that one variable of movement — that is, comparing cultures that carried the infant on the body of the mother throughout the day versus those that had little or no baby-carrying, could actually predict 80% of the peaceful and violent behavior of the 49 tribal cultures.

Arnell Dowret: You studied 49 tribal cultures, and you studied particularly less complex cultures than, say, our society because you were looking to have it be as uncomplicated by other extenuating factors. And in those 49, you found 80% predictability of a predisposition toward violence, or lack of it if children were properly nurtured with movement and the kind of bonding that was involved with rocking or carrying the child.

James W. Prescott: Right. And then I asked the question, "Why does infant/baby carrying during the first year of life not predict 100%?" Any theory has to account for the exceptions. And since we're looking at the primary variable pleasure, the pleasures due to bonding, I examined the attitudes and behaviors towards premarital sex, of youth sexuality, and I found that the exceptions could be all accounted for, whether the culture either supported or punished youth sexuality.

Arnell Dowret: So in other words, where there wasn't a great deal of infant attention and indulgence, that could be somehow compensated for later in life if there was not repression of sexuality.

James W. Prescott: That is correct.

Arnell Dowret: And conversely, where there was infant indulgence and nurturing,

but heavy repression of sexuality, there were incidents where you still wound up with the violent behavior.

James W. Prescott: Yes. It takes two, both stages of development: the maternal/infant affectional bond, and then the youth sexual/affectional bond. And those two variables were sufficient to predict with 100% accuracy either the peaceful or violent nature of the culture.

Arnell Dowret: It's amazing work. It's just amazing work.

James W. Prescott: Yes. And then just to bring it up-to-date, I extended these studies to breastfeeding. And found that breastfeeding bonding is highly predictive of depression and suicidal behavior. So that 70% of 26 cultures where weaning age was 2½ years or greater were rated as lowest-suicidal cultures. And then when I incorporated the variable of support of or to punish youth sexual behavior, that was raised to 82%. So between the two primary measures of bonding with the mother, the baby-carrying bonding and the breastfeeding bonding, there's overwhelming evidence that this is highly predictive of either peaceful or of violent behavior expressed in homicidal behaviors or suicidal behaviors.

Arnell Dowret: Right. Now before we talk about some of the other implications of this study and other work you've done that is along these lines, let me ask you a question that a lot of our skeptic audience might be questioning, which is: how were you able to tell that your results were scientifically credible and not the result of bias? Because we're living in a time now where social scientists like yourself—

James W. Prescott: Well, I'm not really a social scientist. Well, I guess I am, but I'm also a neuropsychologist.

Arnell Dowret: Right. And you were looking, in some cases, at actual brain characteristics that were physically there and verifiable. But I'm just wondering how you respond to that, because so much of the work that has been done in the last century is being dismissed by very conservative people that somehow would like us to believe that social science is irrelevant.

James W. Prescott: Well, let me say this: I was not responsible for the primary coding of behaviors in these various cultures. This was conducted by cultural anthropologists. And I have taken their work, and the [unintelligible] of data that I relied on is from R. B. Textor's [*Cross-Cultural Summary*](#), which had a 400-culture sample which he selected from the broader cultural basis of the ethnographic atlas.

Arnell Dowret: So you didn't interface with the actual tribes and primitive cultures; these were interfaced by others, but the data had been compiled, and then you were looking to see if these kinds of behaviors and behavioral ways of childrearing correlated.

James W. Prescott: Yes. And the reason these relationships were not discovered before, is that the cultural anthropologists who were into childrearing practice weren't interested in violence and aggression or sexuality. And those cultural anthropologists who

were interested in violence and aggression weren't interested in childrearing practice or sexuality, and then those who were interested in sexual behavior of these cultures weren't interested in childrearing practices or violence. So they never really talked to each other. They didn't have a theory that would bring them together.

Arnell Dowret: Well, it took a Dr. James Prescott. But then: *what happened?!?* What happened to your work? You went to your employer, who was the federal agency the National Institute of Health. Were they: "Wow! This is great work, Dr. Prescott. We've gotta move on this"?

James W. Prescott: Well unfortunately, history has been otherwise. I was involved in producing a documentary produced by Time-Life Films, [*Rock-a-Bye Baby*](#), which laid out the variety of research programs that were supported by the NIH, NICHD, Child Health and Human Development Institute and National Institute of Mental Health, which documented these kinds of relationships. And it never struck a strong chord. This is probably the most successful film of Time-Life in the nontheatrical film production division. And it still continues today. And you won't find any citation of the scientific literature that was supported by NICHD money in the scientific literature. And particularly, [*From Neurons to Neighborhood*](#), which was published by the National Academy of Sciences, you won't find one mention of any of the basic neurobiological studies, let alone cross-cultural studies.

Arnell Dowret: So why do you think that the National Institute of Health didn't be more supportive about this work?

James W. Prescott: Well that's a good question. Well, we got a new institute director in the fall of 1974 who really didn't like the subject matter of child abuse and neglect. And so, we sort of clashed on the importance of this subject for study. To make a long story short, I ultimately was dismissed from my position [after] about 15 years, while I was with the NICHD. And the language for my dismissal was something like "for supporting research in child abuse and neglect, misusing the official resources of my office, and supporting research in child abuse and neglect and developmental origins." Subject matter was not within the mission of the NICHD.

Arnell Dowret: Basically, they dismissed you and cited all the good work you were doing as evidence. Amazing. Now let's just bring it up to the present, because unbelievably, we're running out of time. Currently, you continue to try to crusade for better treatment of our children. I understand that you're in support of a document to challenge and prohibit child genital mutilation, with the euphemism "circumcision", that is done in many cultures.

James W. Prescott: Yes, and that battle is still continuing. But that issue did not appear in the central conflict that I had with the NIH.

Arnell Dowret: No, I just want to move on now to just the present, because we have a few more minutes and I just wanted to ask you: a natural ally would seem to be those people, as I had said in our introduction, that have already let go of the precepts of religion and the kind of supernatural debasement of the material and the bodily. People who have kind of discarded that, as we'll find in our humanist and secular organizations, you would think

would be natural allies to support your work. Have you found those groups to be natural allies?

James W. Prescott: No. It's rather shocking to discover that all of the major national and international humanist organizations had failed to endorse the Montagu Resolution to End the Genital Mutilation of Children Worldwide.

Arnell Dowret: They failed to endorse the resolution to end genital mutilation.

James W. Prescott: And so, I'm still battling that battle. But the American Humanist Association, Paul Kurtz's Council for Secular Humanism, the American Ethical Union, which Felix Adler was the founder of, the Ethical Culture movement, who was strongly opposed to circumcision: they all refused to endorse the Montagu Resolution because it included males as well as females. And none of these organizations want to touch the male genital mutilation issue because it would offend the Jewish community. We still have a [website](#) up on this effort, and we're seeking support and endorsers of the Montagu Resolution.

Arnell Dowret: And your website, which is www.violence.de, the website that features your work, it links to the anti-circumcision petition, if our listeners want to learn more about your work and there's just a fine collection of material there, including the source of the documentary clips that we played and a couple of other video documentaries and a heap of correspondence and studies that you've done throughout your career. Ultimately, this work that you've done regarding deprivation of bodily pleasure as it impacts upon human development, seems to also touch upon our attitudes about how we handle criminal justice issues and the issue of, ultimately, global annihilation seems to all really be very much influenced by how we're going to rear our young. Is that what your conclusions have led you to?

James W. Prescott: Yes, and I would like to emphasize one other thing, if I can, before the program is over. And that is that the commercial infant formula is significantly deficient in the essential amino acids which are the precursors for the development of the brain neurotransmitter system, like serotonin, which has been implicated in depression and suicidal behaviors. And also for dopamine. And I've been trying to get the NIH to address this issue of commercial infant formula that is malnourishment for the normal development of the brain and behavior. And when you combine this with the impaired affectional bonding between mother and infant and child, you see this in our infant day care centers, early childhood daycare centers.

Arnell Dowret: So clearly, an important part of this equation is, we've got to keep on pushing that children are breastfed, otherwise it really impacts on normal, healthy brain development as well.

James W. Prescott: Exactly.

Arnell Dowret: One last question for you, which is just: today, people who are basically dismissive of the influence of environmental factors and emphasizing the influence

of genes, like Steven Pinker, seem to be the darlings of humanists and academics everywhere. What do you think about that?

James W. Prescott: Well, the environment is overwhelmingly more important than genes. There's no living organism that can grow up to be a healthy, functioning organism by living in a toxic environment. And so I think that says it all.

Arnell Dowret: That does say it all.

James W. Prescott: And the environment does regulate and control gene expression.

Arnell Dowret: OK, very good. We have to obviously go back to this topic and have you on again, Dr. Prescott. I thank you for being with us on Equal Time for Freethought.

James W. Prescott: Well, thank you for having me.

Arnell Dowret: OK, great.

You've been listening to an interview with Dr. James Prescott, as Part 1 of Equal Time for Freethought's two-part examination of the importance of becoming a body-pleasure-positive culture and just how far away we are from it. Next Sunday, January 15th at 6:30 PM, tune in for Part 2, when we'll have live in our studio the advertising director of the fledgling publication for the sex workers, [*Spread Magazine*](#). Her name is Eliyanna Kaiser.