Atheism, Ethics, and Pornography: An Interview with Nina Hartley

by Ryan Shaffer · 26 August 2010

> *Marie Hartman graduated with honors from San Francisco State University and is the author or coauthor of several books published by major publishing houses under her stage name, Nina Hartley. She is also the star of more than 600 adult films spanning three decades. In addition, Hartley is a humanist, a proud atheist, and a vocal feminist. In many ways she is in complete contrast to the other celebrities in her profession; one of the most famous adult film actresses and reality television celebrities in recent years is Mary Carey, a college drop-out who ran in the 2003 California gubernatorial recall election and has attended high-profile conservative events. Carey grew up attending church on a regular basis and remains a Christian who prays daily. I wanted to explore the opposite side of the political and religious spectrum by studying celebrity nontheists. In my research I came across Hartley, who enthusiastically accepted my invitation to discuss her life and her philosophical and social views.*
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> *Hartley's father was a Lutheran and her mother was Jewish, but she was raised in a home without religion where ethics and education were always emphasized. During her three decades in the adult film industry Hartley has been a free speech activist, critic of drug use, campaigner for women's rights, a vocal opponent of racism, and a guest speaker at several universities. Justice and equality are an important aspect of her life, but so is her criticism of religion as a superstitious belief.*

The Humanist: Describe your childhood and your family life.

Nina Hartley: I was born and raised in Berkeley, California, during the 1960s and '70s. I have two older brothers and one older sister. They were gone by the time I was twelve. My father had been blacklisted in 1957, two years before I was born, so the family was in a bit of turmoil when I arrived. I was lonely as a child, but I have a lot of good memories of listening to music and of family gatherings with my aunts, uncles, and cousins. We had very nice holidays, in spite of being non-religious and my mother being Jewish. We did a little Hannukah, a little Christmas, a little Easter, a little Passover.

Religion wasn't much discussed and we never went to church or temple. We had a dog and cat and I babysat as a teenager. I was active in theater in high school, in the costume department. I love theater and dance to this day.

My parents have been married since 1947, though the ten years after my father's blacklisting were tough on them. They came close to divorce before finding Zen

Buddhism. They've been practicing it since 1969, when I was ten and they were middle-aged.

The Humanist: I'm curious about your hobbies and education growing up. You mentioned that your grandfather had a PhD in Physics. Were science and medicine an important part of your life?

NH: Both of my parents are science folks. My mother was a chemist and statistician for the State Department of Public Health and my dad has a good layman's understanding of science and biology. I loved all natural science as a child and wanted to be Jane Goodall when I grew up. I especially liked human biology and anatomy. I'm an RN with a BS in nursing and I love science to this day. I keep up with the latest advances in science and enjoy physics, biology, psychology, brain science, and more.

The Humanist: You weren't raised in a religious home, but one full of values. For the religious, values and religion are synonymous. Could you explain the difference?

NH: We were taught social justice at home. My maternal grandparents were early supporters of civil rights in Alabama, where my mother is from. As secular Jews (my grandfather refused Bar Mitzvah) they were already a minority, but when my grandfather turned to socialism for its sense of social justice it put the family in jeopardy and they were subject to harassment by the Ku Klux Klan. My grandfather almost lost his life to goons.

This sense of social justice carried over into my parents' marriage, and I grew up participating in civil rights marches and anti-war demonstrations. There was never any mention of God as a reason to do right. It was just the right thing to do. I feel strongly to this day that right and religion don't necessarily go hand in hand.

As a believer in evolution, we can "take the best" from religion and "leave the rest." We no longer need the story of "God" to explain why the rain falls, or the wind blows, or spring comes again each year. I'm comfortable with there being things about people or the world that I can't know, or that we don't know yet. I'm fine with life as we know it being random or an "accidental" result of chemical and physical processes.

The Humanist: Was there a particular moment or reason that made you question religion?

NH: I clearly recall in second grade, as I was standing in line to go into class, having the thought, "There is no God and it's all ridiculous." I've never had any reason since then to seriously question that notion. The whole idea of religion seemed utterly alien to me, and religious people seemed silly whenever I saw them praying in public. In Berkeley it wasn't hard to avoid religion, as it wasn't really in the public square at that point, though there are plenty of churches and temples. My grandmother joined the Unitarian Church later in life for the social aspect, but as she said to the pastor

when he came to visit her when she was sick, "I like the Unitarians. It's almost like not going to church at all."

The Humanist: Richard Dawkins' "out campaign" drew parallels between the difficulty atheists and homosexuals have in coming out. Did you ever have trouble acknowledging your atheism to others or yourself? If not, why?

NH: For me, it's been no problem. There are no God-believers in my family, though all of my siblings, as well as my parents, follow a faith tradition. Two of my siblings are Orthodox or Conservative Jews, keep kosher at home, but don't believe in God. I don't know a lot about the faith practice of my oldest brother but I do know he's not a believer. I think I have a cousin by marriage who's a believer.

The Humanist: You're a self-described radical feminist. Please explain what a radical feminist is.

NH: I'm a feminist and some of my ideas are radical, but I'm not a "radical feminist," which occupies its own sub-division of feminist thought. Radical feminists, for all their bloviating and over-intellectualizing about it, really, really just don't like men. Period. Their philosophy boils down to "Men bad. Women good." I reject that notion categorically. Unfortunately, the "men bad, women good" meme has taken hold in the public consciousness and people now think that feminists don't like sex or men, which is bunk.

I'm more a classical liberal feminist: equal pay for equal work, on-site day care, single-payer health coverage, equal opportunity through skills and aptitude instead of gender, generous maternity and paternity leave, and the like. I believe that men and women are both victimized by the patriarchal culture, just in different ways, by different means, for different reasons, and with different results.

I'm well hated in radical feminist circles for the supposed harm I do to women and by the fact that I have sex on camera, both for and with men. I no longer try to talk to them, as I realize radical feminists are just another form of hate group. They really believe that women can't consent to any sexual encounter and I categorically reject that.

The Humanist: Some feminists have criticized pornography as an industry that subjects women to men's desires. While others, notably Nadine Strossen and yourself, have the opposite opinion. How do you respond to the feminists who criticize pornography?

NH: Nadine's book, *"Defending Pornography: Free Speech, Sex, and the Fight for Women's Rights"*, is brilliant and I can't add to her argument. In essence, though, feminism means that I have *choice* in my life — autonomy. It's hard to imagine now, but fifty years ago a woman couldn't get birth control if she was single, and even married women needed their husband's permission to get it. Back-alley abortions killed or maimed thousands of women each year. It was nearly impossible to bring

abuse charges against a husband or wife. Younger people don't realize how bad it was, or how recent. Feminists of the 1960s and '70s really busted the door wide open and we're still sorting it all out. We take for granted now that spousal abuse is a crime but it wasn't like that then.

Women also fought hard for the right to be sexual on our own terms (having sex before marriage, not becoming mothers if we didn't want to), and really made a lot of headway in raising consciousness surrounding rape, which is now taken seriously. A woman's sexual history can no longer be used against her in court when she faces her attacker.

In a nutshell: my body, my rules. Other women don't get to tell me what's "right" for me, just as no imam, rabbi, priest or minister gets to tell me what to do with my body. You don't know better than I do what I need, so don't presume to. If I need your help, I'll ask for it, thank you very much.

The Humanist: Your own experience aside, have you encountered a fair amount of coercion in the adult film business?

NH: In twenty-six years of on-camera work I've witnessed very few instances of coercion of performers on set, and none of a physical nature. Compared to how workers may be "coerced" by superiors in non-sex work employment, I'd say that there are no more instances of this in adult entertainment than in the general population. For people with the right temperament, adult entertainment can be a great way to make a living. The work hours are flexible, and the pay scale is excellent for semi-skilled labor ($300-1,500/day). Women have the right of refusal, always, and exercise it.

There is a stigma still attached to having "adult entertainment" on one's resume, but that's a function of the culture's deep ambivalence toward women and sexuality, plus the projections of a potential employer onto those seeking to leave porn for a so-called straight job. I never experienced discrimination until I came out as a sex worker, and most of that has been from other, educated women who identify as "feminist."

The Humanist: Specifically, would you say many women are not doing it purely by choice?

NH: Absolutely not. Whether or not we agree with or approve of them, the choices made by young women are theirs. If we're to grant autonomy to people over the age of eighteen, then that means accepting their choices as valid, even if we'd never do such a thing. This includes being able to join the army and get shot or maimed, or become a miner or construction worker. Those are deadly jobs (no one has died from making porn in the thirty-seven years it's been legal) and no one thinks to tell a young adult, "Don't do that job, it's dangerous." Or if we do tell them, we accept that, being young people, they may disregard our advice.

If we accept that a young woman can consent to have an abortion or become a parent, then it stands to reason that we must accept that she can consent to make pornography. Of all the branches of sex work available porn is the safest, as it's legal to make and we have an excellent testing program in place (aim-med.org).

These are ambitious, competitive young people, strivers, if you will. Most are not college-educated, nor do they plan to be. Porn is highly paid blue-collar labor and, for many performers, beats the heck out of wearing a paper hat. As entertainers, as well as simply being young people, performers have a high need for excitement and attention, and porn fits the bill.

The Humanist: What do you think could be done to improve the industry?

NH: The widespread notion that legal porn production is a sink hole of abuse and coercion that takes advantage of poor, innocent women, is the biggest smack leveled against the business. It's almost entirely a function or projection of people's fears and discomfort about women, gender relations, sex, sexuality and the graphic depiction of sexual acts. The idea that a woman could choose, on purpose, to perform in pornographic videos for her own reasons still goes deeply against the notion that women are somehow victims of male sexuality, that they're delicate flowers who need the protection of a good man, or the law.

The best protection for women everywhere, especially in the sex trades, is full decriminalization of all consensual sex work. Porn is legal to shoot in California. We pay taxes, buy permits, and the like. Any woman can pick up her phone and call her agent, or the police, and get full support if anything happens on a set.

My biggest complaint these days is how the anti-sex work camp has, for the purpose of public confusion, conflated legal, consensual sex work, specifically pornography, with illegal, non-consensual trafficking of women for forced labor (some of it of a sexual nature). There is *no* connection between the legal material we make here in California and any trafficking of women. Full stop.

Are there some directors or agents with less-than-stellar reputations? Of course. This is not a business of selfless do-gooders (of course, the entire entertainment business is not run by selfless do-gooders). But the world can't be made a child-safe day nursery. We either accept that performers are adults making their own choices (no matter how we may feel about those choices), or we go back to pre-Women's Liberation days, when women couldn't get credit in their own names, obtain birth control without their husband's permission, or wear pants in the work place. Do we really want those days back?

The Humanist: What types of books do you read in your spare time? What are some of your favorite books?

NH: I prefer non-fiction, usually science-related. Some I've enjoyed are: *"The Soul of Sex"* [Thomas Moore], *"Harmful to Minors"* [Judith Levine and Joycelyn M. Elders],

"The Female Brain" [Louann Brizendine], *"Outwitting History"* [Aaron Lansky], *"Some Girls"* [Jillian Lauren], *"Ain't Nobody's Business If You Do: The Absurdity of Consensual Crimes in a Free Society"* [Peter McWilliams], and, interestingly, R. Crumb's *"The Book of Genesis Illustrated"*. I do enjoy some fiction, especially the *"Golden Compass"* trilogy [Philip Pullman] and most anything by Gregory Maguire.

The Humanist: Have you read or followed any of the best-sellers written by new atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Victor Stenger that take an overtly critical look at belief?

NH: I have read the books and liked them well enough. I'm not that angry at religion, as I wasn't indoctrinated with it. I don't care for it, or how other people's religious beliefs impact my life (the abortion debate, consensual adult sex commerce, adult entertainment, recreational drug use, and so forth), but I don't harbor an abiding hatred of it. If I had been bullied by believers, or harmed by the church, I might have stronger feelings.

The Humanist: Ethics is a complicated subject since morality has changed over the centuries from outlawing slavery to allowing women to vote. There is a great difficulty in explaining morality, but how would you best sum up your ethics?

NH: I'm a secular humanist. I'm a believer in the Golden Rule. I'm not out to hurt anyone, but will defend myself if need be. I think most people are good at heart, though I do believe that some people are inherently bad, like sociopaths (usually born that way, sometimes made so by circumstance). I operate from the assumption that people's motives are good (if, at times, misguided) until proven otherwise. I seek to enable people's growth and liberation, especially in the sexual realm.

The Humanist: In your industry, there are several well-known Christians and conservatives. What would you tell an outsider about the adult industry's religious and political demographics?

NH: Most have been raised in Christian homes, though few are currently practicing. That's because most people in the United States are raised in Christian homes, of some sort or another. A number of us are from Jewish homes, also non-practicing. Most people in the business have some conflict regarding their upbringing and behavior, as would be expected in such a conflicted culture.

The Humanist: Is there any hypocrisy in being a Christian (or religious) and working in the adult film industry?

NH: I would think so, but there are several people in the business who identify as Christian. I think making movies would violate the adultery prohibition. Though one gets around it by saying that work is lust, not love, so it's okay. Convoluted thinking is nothing new in religion.

The Humanist: You have an open relationship with your husband. Several notable anti-Victorians had similar relationships or were opposed to marriage entirely. Some had lasting relationships and others didn't. What do you want people to know about these relationships?

NH: Open relationships are good for people who are not, by personal nature, monogamous. Open relationships have their own challenges, of course, as well as their own satisfactions. Don't judge what you don't know. Truly open relationships aren't cheating, as all is above board.

The Humanist: Such relationships have been denounced as immoral by the same leaders of the religious and political right who are the victims of scandals (Ted Haggard, John Ensign, Mark Sanford). What do you say to those who denounce it as immoral?

NH: Stop being hypocritical jerks. I'm reminded of the adage of people who live in glass houses. I don't lie about what I do or with whom I sleep, or present myself as some moral authority.

The Humanist: What would most people be shocked to know about you? What's the biggest misconception people have?

NH: The biggest misconception is that I have sex all the time, with anyone; that I'm amoral; that I must hate myself; that I'm unable to have a real relationship with a partner; that I'm rich; that I must be stuck up; that I'm an abuse survivor.

They may be shocked to know I'm a doting aunt and a devoted daughter.

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Published in the September/October 2010 Humanist
<https://thehumanist.com/magazine/september-october-2010/>