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Sex and Christianity: Re-thinking the Relationship

I made my first visit to India over 30 years ago. I have been back several times since then, but my first visit was unforgettable.

I was in my early 20s, and studying Theology at the University of Edinburgh. During a summer break I went to live in India for about three months. One weekend I went with a group of other students to the ancient caves of Ajanta and Elora near Bombay. This is one of Hinduism's sacred sites. It's a series of caves hollowed out of the face of a cliff, forming a natural temple in the side of a vast rock face. If you've seen the movie "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom" you get the idea. The walls are ornately carved and sculpted. You walk through gallery after gallery of carvings dating back many centuries, and a deep sense of the holy pervades the place from the prayers of millions of pilgrims stretching back through time.

In one room I looked closely at the sculptures, and saw figures of men and women engaged in various acts of sexual intercourse. There were dozens of different poses, some of them quite imaginative. Many seemed physically impossible, though quite acrobatically interesting. Looking at them as a Christian, as someone standing outside the Hindu tradition, I experienced what the first Christian missionaries must have felt when they travelled to India to preach the Gospel. I was embarrassed, and then shocked, to see such an open display of sexuality in a sacred place of worship. I immediately pronounced judgment on it to myself as paganism.

Today, looking back from the vantage point of thirty years of experience, I think quite differently about it. Now I give thanks for an ancient people and an ancient tradition that saw the intimate connection between sexuality and spirituality, and understood both of them to be dimensions of human wholeness. I can appreciate now, more than I did then, the importance of a healthy honesty about matters sexual, and how significant it is that they were unafraid to depict this powerful connection in their sacred iconography.

Last year, I visited the Temples of Angkor in Cambodia. There you can see male and female sexual symbolism woven into the very fabric of the ancient spirituality of the Khmer people as well as into the walls of their sacred shrines. The religions of the East, it seems to me, have been quite honest in their understanding of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality.

Christianity, I believe, has not been very successful at this. In fact, I'm not convinced that any of the three great Western religions – Christianity, Judaism or Islam – has succeeded in properly integrating human sexuality into an understanding of divine creation or divine creativity. The fact is that all of them have in different ways regarded sexual passion as a dangerous force that threatens the purity of the spiritual life.

Christian tradition, in particular, has developed a deep suspicion of *eros*. Eros - which the Greeks defined as “the drive toward union with the Other” – has been viewed purely as an aspect of the flesh, as mere physical passion with the potential to propel human beings toward chaos. Eros has been feared as something uncontrollable, something that leads to the subversion of Christian moral conduct and ethical standards. The Church, by and large, has not seen eros as a dimension of the human spirit, as an aspect of the ‘homing mechanism’ God has built into us at creation as part of the design to draw us back to Himself. It was St. Augustine who first described this homing mechanism. He called it a ‘restlessness of the heart.’ He said, “my heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee.”

Augustine's own conversion to Christianity meant for him a turning away from physical passion, even the abandonment of his lover and partner. He understood spiritual purity to be incompatible with sexual desire. St. Paul in the New Testament had made a sharp distinction between the spirit and the flesh. He urged believers to walk in the way of the spirit and to renounce the ways of the flesh. There is no indication Paul himself meant this to become an absolute separation, but as the years went by it became so in the minds of many Christian teachers. Several leading thinkers of the Christian movement in its early years went even further than Paul or Augustine. Some had themselves castrated as a form of total dedication to God. There is evidence that castration became a kind of graduation ritual for enthusiasts in some early Church seminaries.

From very early times, therefore, the Church has tried to suppress *eros* and to denounce the erotic, or at least to transform it into something else, something called *agape*, a purely spiritual, non-physical and dispassionate form of love – the love which the mystics expressed as pure contemplation and devotion. ¹

Our inability to see sexuality as definitive or constitutive of human being, and to see *eros* as an expression of the Spirit – the yearning for union with the Other, with the Divine – has had disastrous consequences for Christianity and for western civilization. Instead of integrating sexuality into a wholistic understanding of life, we have fallen into a profound dualism that separates spirit and flesh, a dualism that raises the spiritual above the physical. This has had major consequences for almost every aspect of our culture, not the least of which is the pornography industry today and the enormous rise of prostitution in Western society and wherever Western tourists go.

Because of our suspicion of the erotic, it has been derided and marginalized by our culture's moral architects. But when you suppress erotica, you get pornography. And when you suppress healthy sexual relationships, you get the commercialization of sex and the terrible slave trade in women and children, who are used as sexual objects throughout the world in the most degrading and dehumanizing ways.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the 19th century philosopher, observed that “Christianity gave Eros, the god of love, poison to drink. He did not die of it, it is true, but he degenerated into vice.” In Jungian language today, perhaps we might say that we must learn to integrate the erotic, to allow it to take its playful and creative part in the whole matrix of human individuation and moral development. If you try to suppress it, it will become your shadow, a dark inner force that will rise up and take you over at the most vulnerable and dangerous moments, throwing your life, and sometimes even the lives of others, into chaos and anarchy.

The point I am trying to make is that Christianity as a religion stands in need of a better theology of sexuality, a better understanding of the complex role sexuality plays in our human nature, and of the purposes of God in creating us as sexual beings, among other things. The Church must find a way to discover that human beings are sexual beings and, in the words of the creation stories in the Book Genesis, that “this is very good.” Our sexuality is essential to who we are. And if we believe, as Christians do, that we are created in the image of God, that we carry in our very selves the icon of God’s own self in our earthly existence, then we must be able to say that our sexuality is not an accident, not a mistake, and not simply a tool for the making of babies (presumably God, in his infinite wisdom, could have devised a much less potent and complicated way of regenerating the species if the purpose of sex was simply that). God has made our sexuality good. We should rejoice in it, and we must also find the proper way to use it for our good and for the good of all.

But this task of finding a new and positive theology of sexuality is very challenging for the Church. It involves of necessity an entire re-appraisal of Christian tradition, going right back to the Bible itself. It should not be surprising that such a thing is very difficult, and that much resistance will be met along the way. The official organs of the Church have generally not grasped the challenge of finding a new way to speak and think about sex. Instead, they have put a lot of energy and effort into re-stating and re-enforcing the traditional line, and of suppressing and persecuting individuals who have argued for a new understanding.

The classic statement of the Christian Church on this matter comes from the Roman Catholic Papal Encyclical of 1968 called “*Humanae Vitae*” – published in 1968. This outlines the official Catholic view that the purpose of human sexuality is for procreation, that is, the reproduction of the human species through fertilization, conception and birth. This is of course possible only for members of the opposite sex with each other, and the Encyclical argues that the proper and only moral context for sex is marriage, the permanent, faithful and lifelong commitment of one man to one woman. *Humanae Vitae* condemned birth control as an unnatural interruption of the divinely intended process of procreation and reproduction. We know, of course, that this is widely ignored by Roman Catholic lay people today all across the world, and even by some of its clergy!

At the time *Humanae Vitae* was published, many articles and books were written about it. One of them was by Philip Sherrard, then professor of Orthodox Theology at London

University in England. His book “Christianity and Eros” is still an important and valuable critique of the Roman Catholic – and one might say the traditional Christian - position. Sherrard says this:

In spite of the fact that marriage is recognized as a sacrament by the Church, the attitude of Christian thought toward the sexual relationship and its spiritualizing potentialities has been in practice singularly limited and negative. From the start, Christian authors have been ill at ease with the whole subject.

First, supported by a literal interpretation of Christ’s words about those who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, as well as by St. Paul’s commendation of the single state (1 Cor 7), early Christian theologians did not hesitate to affirm that celibacy *per se* is superior to marriage; and second, they have seemed incapable of envisaging any aspect of sexuality other than its purely generative (not to say genital) expression, and towards this they display an antipathy obsessive to a degree scarcely less than vicious.

Although precluded by their basic doctrine from subscribing to an out-and-out dualism in this matter, and so from attributing the origin of sexuality directly to an evil power, their practical attitude differs little from that of the dualists of the Manichaeic type. Sexuality is tainted. It is impure. It invests matrimony (which in any case must be regarded as a concession to those too feeble to endure the single state) with shame and contaminates those who indulge in it. If not actually evil in itself, its use stirs up the passions and so leads directly to sin. It is the springhead through which the tribes of evil pour into human nature.²

There may of course be a number of reasons for this negative view of sexuality in the early years of the Christian movement. One of them has to do with the context in which the early Christian communities lived. The matter of sexual conduct did not arise in the Jerusalem community, but in Rome and Corinth. It was the Greek world into which the Church moved that presented a dramatic contrast to the ethical standards of Christians. We know about the cult of temple prostitution in Corinth, the worship of the goddess Aphrodite, that involved both males and females in sexual acts outside the covenant of personal relationship or mutual commitment.

The Greeks also tolerated sex between adult males and young boys– which is almost certainly the context in which the New Testament condemns homosexuality. The word homosexuality does not appear in the Bible in any translation until the 20th century. The Greek and Hebrew words in the Bible itself are obscure in their meaning, but it is certain the biblical writers simply assumed everyone to be heterosexual, and saw same-sex attraction and sexual intimacy as acting against human nature by some sort of voluntary choice.

St. Paul understood same-sex relationships only in terms of the older-man and younger-boy relationship of the Greeks, which we call pederasty, or in other words child abuse. It was and still is an intolerable practice, and Christians from the very beginning have

condemned the practice. But no difference was perceived between child abuse and adult same-sex love. Against this background, and within the dominant expectation at the time that Christ was about to appear again on earth at any moment, the negative teaching against erotic and sexual passion found its way into the foundational documents of the Christian tradition.

And because no distinction has been made in Christian tradition between pederasty and homo-erotic attraction among adults, the condemnation of one has simply become an uncritical condemnation of the other. Today we have a better understanding of homosexuality as a basic and natural orientation experienced by some members of the human community, just as we find the same thing among some animal species, and in Christian terms we must come to think of this as not only natural but also God-given and good. But these developments in the social sciences and therefore in popular understanding are still relatively new – since about the 19th century. They have not yet penetrated the Church's thinking except at the edges of its consciousness and greatly against its will.

Philip Sherrard raises the question of why the Church has viewed sex largely and merely in terms of its genital aspects. He points out that this is a severely reductionist approach. The Church, he says, recognized early on that sex could not be ignored, that procreation was necessary to the continuation of human life (and also, not incidentally, of the Church itself), and so took the view that sex was only a functional act, a mere biological exercise, and that no form of sexual pleasure was either necessary or permitted. He goes on to say this:

If one now asks how Christian teaching has come to concentrate so one-sidedly on the genital aspect of the sexual relationship, the answer is that this stems directly from the too simple assumption that the principal end of marriage, and that which uniquely specifies its nature, is the procreation and education of children.

Once this assumption is made, the emphasis in Christian thought on genital intercourse isolated from other aspects of the full sexual relationship is quite logical, because it is genital intercourse, irrespective of other aspects of the relationship, that produces children. Consequently, intercourse is regarded primarily as a biological activity designed exclusively for that purpose.

Christian teaching on marriage has literally made a religion out of having children. In fact, such a religion has it made out of having children that in spite of its ambivalent attitude towards the act of intercourse itself, it may be said to be among the great promoters of this act, provided it takes place within the limits of marriage.

Within marriage, the begetting of children is regarded as a praiseworthy and even as a divinely approved activity whatever the circumstances. There is no real concern for the inner quality of the married relationship itself, and no real

understanding that for the married couple to produce children in certain circumstances may be little short of sacrilege or even murder.

Outside marriage there must be no genital intercourse, however deep the relationship between the man and the woman may be. But once legally married, the couple are exhorted to be fruitful and multiply virtually without restriction and certainly without there being a question of whether the marriage is a marriage in the true sense – a union and reciprocity of body and soul. It is in accord with this attitude that the Christian priest is asked to give his blessing to unions that in effect may be entirely graceless and unspiritual; and he may grant communion to one who is “faithful” to his or her married state whether or not there is any true love in it.

In spite of the Christian gospel, the Church tends to count as adultery only what has been committed in the most explicit way, not also what has been committed “in the heart.” Such an attitude not only results in the debasing of the priestly function in this respect; it also means that in relation to the sexual life the Church itself is little more than a brothel of which the priest is the bawd: the point of marrying in the Church is that it makes possible, almost obligatory, to have ‘legal’ or at least not mortally sinful genital intercourse.³

If we ask the question: is the purpose of human sexuality related exclusively to procreation? – and if we answer ‘no’ – then a number of traditional Christian teachings and doctrines come under serious question. If sex is not just for having children, then we must challenge the condemnation by the Church throughout the centuries of such things as masturbation, birth control, abortion, and homosexuality. Because it is on the basis of the doctrine of procreation that these practices have been ruled out. They do not further the goal of pregnancy. The Church has reasoned that they are against the will of God, but if they are not then the Church has no moral ground to insist on their prohibition.

Once you question the connection between sexuality and procreation, and once you move the focus of sexuality beyond mere genital activity and into the realm of total interpersonal relationships, and even spiritual relationships, then traditional Christian teachings about sex appear to be quite limited and limiting.

Two things have caused this connection to be broken in our lifetime. One is the Pill. The other is the emergence of new reproductive technologies. The universal availability of birth control for women and men in Western societies has effectively severed the connection between sex and procreation. People can now have sex without having children. People can now have sex purely as an expression of pleasure and delight in each other. And that’s not all. New scientific and medical advances have severed the connection between procreation and intercourse itself. People can now have children without engaging in sexual intercourse at all. These two developments alone have made traditional teaching on sex questionable at the very least, and force us to ask again for a deeper and more wholistic understanding of human sexuality.

This work has begun, of course, and the pioneering work is being done by women scholars, particularly by feminist theologians, poets, thinkers and writers both inside and outside the Church. It has started with new work in Biblical Studies. This is where all Christian reform has to begin.

In the last few generations women biblical scholars have made an enormous discovery. They have discovered a new continent: not a geographic continent, but an ideological continent called patriarchy. It turns out that we have all been living on this continent unknowingly for many centuries. Women scholars have proven beyond any reasonable doubt that the Bible itself, and all subsequent Church history, has been developed and refracted through the lens of male experience. Male experience is not the same as women's experience, but this distinction has not found its way into the Bible or into the doctrines and teachings of the Church.

This new knowledge is akin to the discovery of the lost continent of Atlantis – that mythical island that appears and disappears in mediaeval legend. Women have begun to make visible the contours of patriarchy within which all Western culture and Christian theology has been developed, and this new knowledge changes everything. We can no longer live and work in the modern world as if this has not happened any more than we can do physics as if Relativity or Quantum theory were still unknown.

The implications for Christian faith are profound. We know that the dualism of flesh and spirit, which is a Greek intrusion into Hebrew thought, became the basis not only for the denigration of sexuality but also for the oppression of women. It was women who were seen as symbols of the flesh, of the lower order, while men were held to belong to the higher order of intellect and reason through which alone the true knowledge of God could come. Women who espoused virginity, through ascetic or monastic disciplines, could achieve a life of purity. But for most women the role of childbearing remained for them the sole justification of their sexuality which, for the greater part of Christian history until very recently, was regarded by the Church as both morally and spiritually inferior to men's.

What is perhaps less understood today is that this process of the subjugation of women's sexuality has had equally profound and disastrous consequences for men, particularly for male sexuality. Instead of developing along the lines of mutuality and equality, male and female sexuality have become inextricably linked to roles of dominance and submission. For men, this means sexuality is most often expressed through power, and sometimes the use of force. A great deal of male sexual fantasy, especially male pornography (including gay pornography), features a disturbing obsession with violence and cruelty. The link between male sexuality and coercive power dominates our entire culture and is visible almost everywhere. The pornography industry itself is in fact largely about images of male power over women.

Recently, a number of men have begun to re-think male identity in light of the positive discoveries of the women's movement. These are men for whom feminism is not a threat, or a challenge to their identity, but the sign of a new possibility of mutuality and self-

renewal. One could pick out many examples, but let me mention the American writer James Nelson.

In his book “Intimate Connection” Nelson argues for a male sexuality that is based on mutuality and reciprocity, and a male spirituality that is based on openness to the nurturing, life-giving nature of God. Nelson argues that patriarchy has produced two destructive children. One is sexism, and the other is homophobia. Sexism has been oppressive to women by raising males above females in the order of nature. Homophobia has been oppressive to gay and transgendered men by lowering them to the status of women – indeed, lower than women because homosexual men were believed to have been used as women in the sexual act, yet without the potentiality for childbearing that alone justified women’s inferior sexuality, according to tradition.⁴

Thus, gay men have been more despised than women, even lesbian women, because they fail to meet patriarchy’s standards of maleness that have to do with power and control over women. It is not surprising then, that Churches today all across the world are just beginning to struggle with gay, lesbian and transgendered persons and their legitimate quest for equality rights. Because the Church has now been alerted to patriarchy. The Church cannot defend itself against patriarchy because it is a morally corrupt ideology. Once it is exposed, the twin issues of women’s equality and homosexual dignity must necessarily come to the forefront of the Church’s self-examination. And the Church, for all its fearfulness and desire to avoid reality, will find it cannot successfully go backwards.

All of this calls us to answer the deeper question: what then is a responsible sexuality? How is human sexuality properly expressed? When and how does our sexuality contribute to our spiritual health and well-being and bring us into a true relationship with ourselves, with others and with God? From a religious point of view, it’s not enough simply to throw away the traditional restraints on extra-marital sex and promiscuity without making a clear and positive statement about what human sexuality is for, what its creative and life-giving potential might be, and how it is related to our quest for spiritual wholeness.

Here, as a Christian, I must turn to the New Testament – but not to St. Paul, who for some reason has been regarded as the Bible’s authority on sex – but to Jesus. I believe it is in Jesus that we see what God intends for humanity, for male and female alike, and in Jesus we see a glimpse of the “fullness of life” that God establishes through him as the new humanity into which his believers and followers are baptized.

What we see in Jesus is both an example of the single life which can be consecrated to God and lived fully and completely without genital activity, and also of a life that is lived always in relationship with others and with God, in full community with men and women and children. We see in him an invitation to all people to live in these same loving and healthy relationships without fearfulness, without guilt, without the need to control or coerce others, and especially without the sin of rejecting our own God-given nature and sexual orientation.

There is almost nothing in the teaching of Jesus about sex. It seems he was not really interested in the subject, unlike many of his followers. Perhaps this is why St. Paul has become much more of an authority on the subject, since he had much more to say about it. But it is very important to understand that most of Paul's opinions about sex cannot be found on the lips of Jesus. Paul's statements come almost entirely from the Jewish orthodoxy of the time, and were not unique to the Christian movement.

Jesus does have a comment about marriage. He says "a man shall leave his father and mother and be made one with his wife." He does not say *every* man shall become one with a wife, nor *every* woman with a husband. Indeed, Jesus himself never married, so he cannot be made into an icon of the modern family values movement trumpeted by the Christian far-right. And, of course, he says nothing at all about homosexuality.

The context of this statement by Jesus is a discussion about divorce. In Jesus' day divorce was permitted for men only. A man could divorce his wife, but not vice-versa. Divorce was much more devastating to a woman than a man in the ancient world, as it is in many countries today, because women were subject to a social stigma and ostracism after a marriage breakdown that men were not. It is likely that Jesus' teaching about the strong bond of marriage and against divorce was out of a deep concern for the vulnerability of women, and a desire to protect the equality of relationships instead of upholding the patriarchal system of male heterosexual dominance.

What we do find in Jesus teaching – and everywhere throughout the Bible – is an emphasis on commitment, faithfulness, and integrity in relationships. Jesus' teaching on divorce is deliberately set in the context of his rejection of infidelity. His whole life was an expression of his fidelity to God, and he spoke passionately about the promise of God's fidelity to us. Over and over again, in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, we learn of God's faithfulness, and God's unconditional love, and it is frequently contrasted with the unfaithfulness of human beings both in their relationships with each other and in their relationship to God. Integrity and commitment are what Jesus demonstrates in all his encounters with women and men in the Gospels, and finally of course in his death on the Cross.

This suggests, then, that the primary criterion for a Christian sexual theology is not procreation but rather faithfulness and commitment. This is the supreme message of the life of Jesus and ought to be the principal standard for Christian sexual ethics – not sexual orientation, not propagation, nor even marriage. Fidelity to one another, to one's partner, and to God, respect for the dignity of every human being and for the sacredness of the human body, a rejoicing in human sexuality as both gift and expression of divine creativity – these are the elements of a more positive approach to sexuality that the Church needs to pursue.

And it must confront its own homophobia, which is a child of patriarchy and injustice. Fidelity, faithfulness and commitment are virtues of which homosexual and transgendered people are capable, just as much as heterosexuals. In fact, I have heard the

argument made that the reason the Bible says much more about heterosexuality than homosexuality is that straight people need more guidance!

The Church needs to open itself to new knowledge, and to the experience of all its people. Let me close with a warning from William Blake:

When thought is closed in caves, then love shall shew its roots in deepest Hell.

¹ See, for example, *Agape and Eros*, Anders Nygren, University of Chicago Press, 1982 (first published in Sweden in 1935).

² *Christianity and Eros: Essays on the Theme of Sexual Love*; Philip Sherrard, SPCK London, 1976, pp. 4-5. There have since been a great many books on the same theme – see for example *Toward a Theology of Eros*, Virginia Burrus ed., Fordham University, 2006, and its extensive bibliography.

³ *ibid*, pp. 30-31

⁴ *The Intimate Connection: Male Sexuality, Masculine Spirituality*, James B. Nelson, London SPCK, 1992