
IN THE FLESH

Part three: Sex and the Spirit

In the last of a three-part series to promote discussion on questions about sex and God, **Carla Grosch-Miller** looks at the relationship between sexuality and spirituality

Recently I gave a talk about sex and Christianity in a church as part of a series organised by a social worker. She said afterwards that, despite being involved in fostering human wellbeing throughout her career, she had never connected sexuality and spirituality. Her response is not unusual – sex and money seem to be the two areas that church people most compartmentalise away from their faith.

However, in the last few decades there has been an explosion of interest in the link between sexuality and spirituality. Writers as diverse as journalist Jo Ind (*Memories of Bliss: God, sex and us*, SCM, 2003), theologian Philip Sheldrake (*Befriending our desires*, Darton Longman & Todd, 2002), biblicist David Carr (*The Erotic Word: Sexuality, spirituality and the Bible*, OUP, 2005) have plumbed scripture and the tradition looking for a link. And they have found it. Well before late medieval mystics began writing commentary on the Song of Songs, as early as the late fifth century the Christian theologian and philosopher Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite identified God with Eros as the one who causes and is love.

The enquiry into lived human experience has proved equally fruitful. The Roman Catholic theologian Joan Timmerman, in *Sexuality and Spiritual Growth*, Crossroad 1992, argues that sexuality can function in human life as a sacramental reality, integral to spiritual growth: Both sexuality and spirituality are about personal relationship; both are involved in identity; both can touch transcendence; both may enable us to become moral agents, capable of responsible and ethical action in the world.

The integration of sexuality and spirituality is a life journey. Ministerial sexual misconduct and abuse demonstrate that knowing “the rules” is not enough. Rather, the journey is about accepting and integrating these two intimate parts of our being. Our acceptance and responsible expression of sexuality fosters spiritual growth. Timmerman observes that our sexuality provides rites of passage that also contain spiritual tasks and achievements. Consider these parallel developmental tasks: The awareness

and acceptance of our sexual being relates to the self-knowledge and self-acceptance fostered by a healthy spirituality; perceiving the capacity and need for intimacy and allowing oneself to be vulnerable and open to another are important in sexual and spiritual maturity, and choosing committed love, celibate or partnered, to another person is akin to choosing committed love of God. She argues that moments in sexual development are not just indices of change, but rather they can cause the shift “from child to adult, alone to connected, consumer of the emotional resources of humanity to generator of life and love”. Our sexuality, in other words, can call forth our growth into mature and faithful adulthood.

For many people faith has been a handmaiden to sexual development despite the sex-negative messages that the Church has given over the centuries. For others religion has made integrating a healthy sexuality and spirituality difficult, sometimes causing shame and pain particularly to people who find themselves outside of the traditionally accepted categories of heterosexual or married. The sociologist Sonya Sharma has shown that young Christian women continue to struggle to live their gender and sexuality in healthy ways; Andrew Yip has demonstrated the same for Christian lesbian and gay people. Some people have to leave the Church in order to find sexual and spiritual wholeness. Worse, some contemplate leaving life: The Kinsey Institute senior researcher John Bancroft found that young people who struggle with their sexuality not fitting “the norm” have a higher incidence of suicide ideation and attempt.

Defining Christian sexual ethics as a set of “Thou shalt nots” is particularly problematic. There is evidence that highly restrictive, rigid attitudes to sexuality can make it difficult to control one’s sexual behaviour. John Bancroft reports that such attitudes “can result in the inability to conform, starting off a cycle of guilt, pain and compulsivity”. Some Christians experience this in addition to pornography.

What can a Church do to foster sexual-spiritual integration? For starters, we need to learn to break the silence and shame that surrounds the topic. I was raised in the American Midwest. You won’t find a more



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taciturn people when it comes to talking about sex. The first time I gave a lecture on the topic I could feel the red begin at the bottom of my feet and rise to the top of my head. All I could think was: “What would my mother say if she could hear me use these words, and in front of church people?” If I could learn to talk about it, anyone can. The real challenge is in creating environments and a vocabulary to talk about it safely and respectfully. Most of the talk about sex in society at large is titillating or degrading.

The next step is to get educated. The point of this series of articles has been to provide information and talking points. Christian tradition has a complex history on the topic of sex, and continues to evolve dynamically. I appreciate the struggle and courage of lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians who have stayed

in the Church. Their presence provokes us to ask hard questions: Is sex really only about procreation? If not, what is it about? Might there be something more that we have to learn about sex and God?

The link between sexuality and spirituality may provide the beginning of some answers, and a new way of looking at what the Church can offer a hurting world on the topic. Imagine a Christian sexual ethic that focuses not on genital activity and legal form, but on mutually respectful, potentially sacramental sexual expression that gives us insight into the love of God – sex that helps us grow in communion with God. What a gift to the world that would be! ●



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