

A History and Theology of Sexuality

Diocese of Toronto - Same Sex Consultation

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I have been asked to offer a brief reflection on the history and theology of sexuality. I need to begin with a caveat. Although I will draw on insights from across the history of Judeo-Christian thought, we need to acknowledge at the very beginning that the concept of sexuality is one that is foreign to most of that tradition. Although the bible has a lot to say about sexual love, desire, and behaviour, the idea that sexual desire and behaviour might be a pervasive element of our personalities, affecting many aspects of our lives that are not overtly sexual, can be traced back no further than the latter part of the 18c. At that time psychologists began to develop understandings of psychosexual development and its impact on our general health and well-being. This is one of the realities that makes conversations in this area so very difficult. As Christians we can surrender neither our modern context - with its understandings of the self - nor our commitment to the scriptures as the witness to who we are in the midst of God's saving purposes and as the starting point for our reflections on who we are called to be, and what we are called to become. Yet it is not entirely clear how we are to relate the two.

The other factor that makes our task difficult today is that the topic is vast. As we read the scriptures and examine the writings of great theologians we find a range of attitudes to sex and sexual relationships. While I think there are some clear concerns emerging from the scriptural witness, even there, the attitudes are complex. I cannot hope to cover all the territory that might usefully be covered along the journey that is our developing understanding of human sexuality. What I shall give in this brief summary will be more like a series of postcards highlighting what I take to be striking moments along the way.

So let me start at the beginning of that journey with Genesis 1 and 2. One of the difficulties in handling these texts comes from their relationship to each other. Most scholars now agree that Genesis 2 is older than Genesis 1. However, in the practice of reading closely related passages of scripture that stand in tension, as these do, it was common to see the passage placed second as providing commentary, corrective or at least a questioning dialogue with the first. In this way Genesis 2 would be read as providing commentary on the affirmations about human sexuality in Genesis 1.

In Genesis 1 the creation of human beings takes place in a single act on the sixth day.

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:27)

Some scholars have taken this passage to mean that human beings reflect the image of God in their maleness and femaleness taken together, as if man without woman or woman without man is an only incomplete, partial image of the divine. However, most scholars now see this as an over-reading not justified by the text. Rather the affirmation is that both male and female reflect the image of God completely and perfectly as male and female. This is one point of disagreement between Patrick Yu and myself, because Patrick links the image of God much more closely to the relatedness of male and female than is justified by this passage. The emphasis on procreation however is supported here; because the passage goes on to speak of the relationship between men and women in terms of procreation.

However, Genesis 2 takes a rather different route. It is a story rich in image and symbolism and the part that interests us begins with the first negative judgment on creation "It is not good that the man should be alone." Actually the Hebrew word behind this passage (Adam) should not really be translated as man (I sh). Literally it means creature of the dust (earthling). "It is not good that the earthling should be alone" What follows is an extraordinary story of the search for a fitting companion for Adam, "but for the earthling

there was not found a helper as his partner." So God creates Eve as "bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh" The writer concludes

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

The basic thrust of this story is obviously a little different. Sexuality is now understood not in terms of procreation, but in terms of the search for a fitting companion and in terms of the human need for intimacy. Of course, there are problems. By describing Eve as a helper, the passage introduces a note of hierarchy and this is strengthened even further in the account of the fall. There the curse of Eve includes the prophecy that, "your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." (Genesis 3:16)

Even in this brief account I have spent more time on the Genesis passages than I will be able to spend elsewhere. I have done that because I think we see here some of the key themes and also some of the ambivalences in the Christian tradition's approach to sexuality. On the one hand it is embedded in the social and biological importance of procreation, it is built on an understanding of the created order of things. It also gestures towards an intimacy that was not obviously the quality of all the sexual relationships we see in scripture. It is difficult to understand what sort of intimacy Solomon might have shared with all of his wives! At the same time there is a note of hierarchy. Women are subordinate to men. Some have taken these passages to imply that this is based on differences in the creation of men and women, that they are essentially different, not just biologically but in character and quality. This claim is now widely challenged. We have begun to understand that many of the differences between men and women that we took to be "natural" are in fact the products of social conditioning. What is more troubling is that the differences indicated in Genesis link back to a long line of thinking about women as temptress and seducer and as therefore inherently dangerous. In the scriptures Woman was also a source of impurity especially around menstruation and childbirth. At menstruation women were separated from the wider community and isolated

within the menstrual tent. There is a negativity here that will be emphasised later in the tradition both to support patriarchy – the domination of women by men - and also to support the growth of celibacy and a distrustful attitude to sexual desire in general.

Later, in early Christianity, we see another source of negativity emerging, namely dualism. Dualism sees the spiritual and the physical as separate and distinct. More than that it sees the spiritual as pure, good, and worthy, and the physical as being at best a distraction from the spiritual and at worst being intrinsically evil. The most extreme expressions of these views can be found in certain sects such as Manichaeism. The Manichees are important because St. Augustine, one of the most influential and formative figures of the early church was involved with Manichaeism before his conversion to Christianity and it is often suggested that his rather negative remarks about sexual desire come from this element of his background combined with his own sexual history. When Augustine was 18 he took a concubine, a common arrangement in his day, accepted even by Christians at the time. Yet Augustine seems to have had a somewhat ambivalent attitude to this relationship as we see in his famous prayer, "Lord, give me chastity, and continence, *but not now.*" After 12 years together, and one child, Augustine's mother arranged for him to become engaged to the daughter of a wealthy Milanese Catholic family. The concubine was returned to Africa. We are not told what happened to her. Augustine however feeling bruised by her departure, Augustine took a stopgap measure; he took a mistress. This whole experience left him deeply uncomfortable. Augustine became, and remained deeply suspicious of sexual desire. To quote Peter Brown

In mankind's present state, the sexual drive was a disruptive force. Augustine never found a way, any more than did any of his Christian contemporaries, of articulating the possibility that sexual pleasure might, in itself, enrich the relations between husband and wife.

Brown's point is particularly helpful in reminding us that Augustine's attitudes were not unique, indeed, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that Augustine was far more moderate and compassionate in his attitudes to

sexuality than either Jerome or Ambrose or any of the other great figures of the church of his day. The other thing that is important to notice here is that Augustine is inevitably caught up in the debates of his surrounding culture, as we all are. There is no *pür laine* Christianity – no point or period in which Christians are not responding to the positions of the culture around them – sometimes affirming, sometimes rejecting.

The negativity regarding sexual desire can also be found in the New Testament, think of Paul's suggestion that it is better to marry than to burn, hardly a ringing endorsement of the married state. This negativity has also been carried into our own liturgical traditions. In the prayer book in use up to 1959 the preface to the marriage service speaks of marriage being

Ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

And councils against entering into marriage, “to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding.”

In later Christian thought, sexual relations were treated under the heading of natural law. The early Christian use of natural law theories can be seen as having their roots in two sources. On the one hand a great deal of Hebrew ethical reflection was based around the order of creation. Anything that stood outside that order was confusion, a subversion of God's creative purposes, and was therefore unclean. So, we all know that a fish has gills and scales and swims in water. Eels have gills and swim in water, but no scales, so they are a confusion, and unclean and must not be eaten. Cattle have a cloven hoof and chew the cud, pigs have a cloven hoof, but do not chew the cud, and so they are unclean. There are many attempts to give pseudo-scientific reasons for this order, but Mary Douglas is surely right to see the issue as the control of liminality.¹

Liminality is that experience of being on the edge, being in situations where the usual order of things no longer holds. These situations are disconcerting, confusing, even, perhaps, dangerous. Change in the life of a community is always a liminal experience. That is why we find it uncomfortable, even if we believe it is change for the better. In most societies the liminal moments of human life and development are surrounded by ritual and custom - birth, adolescence and the beginning of

¹ I am drawing from Mary Douglas' book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, NY Routledge 1991, c1966.

menstruation, marriage, sickness and death. In these circumstances the task is to regain control of a situation that has slipped out of control. To find ways of normalising contexts where the usual ways of behaving no longer seem to work. In this context Douglas describes impurity as “dirt out of place”. We can't avoid dirty things completely, but they should be kept in their place. Blood belongs in the body and if it spills out, as in menstruation, it is impure.

In the Christian era this sort of ordering in terms of ritual purity gave way to the categories of Natural Law under the influence of Greek thinkers, particularly Plotinus. Again, the assumption is that we can read the order of the moral life off from the order of creation.

Both of these types of thinking strengthened the link between sexuality and procreation because procreation is the obvious biological purpose and result of sexual activity. Yet is it the only purpose? I have already suggested that it isn't. Is it a necessary purpose? Are all sexual relationships that are not open to procreation inappropriate? If it is then presumably any sexual relationship not open to procreation falls short of the demands of natural law. This would apply not only to homosexual relationships, but also to relationships in which one partner is known to be infertile, relationships entered after the period when procreation is possible, and relationships in which contraceptives are used. It is worth remembering at this point that Anglicans have had a somewhat ambivalent relationship, both to natural law theories, and to the importance of procreation. We see this in the debates around contraception.

People forget that until the 1930's Anglicans were opposed to the use of contraception in all circumstances. The reasons were similar to those that Roman Catholics offered; the use of contraception was a deliberate frustration the natural end and purpose of sex, namely procreation. What changed in the 1930's was that there began to emerge a much more relational approach to sex. This relational approach became more and more central to Anglican understandings so that by Lambeth 1958 we read,

Sexual intercourse is not by any means the only language of earthly love, but it is, in its full and right use, the most intimate and the most revealing. It is a giving and receiving in the unity of two free spirits which is in itself good.... Therefore it is utterly wrong to urge that, unless children are specifically desired, sexual intercourse is of the nature of sin. It is also wrong to say that such intercourse ought not to be engaged in except with the willing intention to procreate Children.

This shift draws our attention to two elements for which we need to turn back into the scriptures and the tradition of the church, namely the evaluation of desire and pleasure, and the importance of intimacy.

First, desire: I have already indicated that there has been a suspicion of the role of sexual desire that has permeated large parts of Christian thinking. For Augustine the ideal was to procreate without the experience of sexual pleasure. For Augustine, sexual pleasure always has the character of sin. This duality continues at some levels even today. Even the recent Church of England Report, *Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate*, which is generally a balanced and helpful document, has an unsettling tendency to oppose procreation to pleasure or personal fulfilment as if these were the only alternatives, or as if personal fulfilment were solely individual, and not relational. At the same time the tradition has some affirmations of sexual love and desire that are wholehearted and frankly erotic. The most obvious example of this is, of course, the Song of Solomon. What this thread of Judeo-Christian thought has had to contend with has been a fear that such erotic desire is too strong, and too dangerous. So it has been repressed or sublimated. The Song of Solomon is displaced from what it so evidently is, an extended poem on the joys of erotic love, to a mystical poem about the soul's desire for God. Yet the very success of this displacement shows us why we need to recover the capacity to speak more frankly and appreciatively of the erotic. The very act of displacing desire into mysticism shows its power and capacity for intimacy and relationship. Yet I cannot in the end believe that our longing for God will be undistorted if we are not able to reflect more clearly and affirm more positively the sexual love and desire through which we learn something of that longing.

Yet sexual desire is certainly disruptive. We are here today because for some this desire is not ordered towards members of the opposite sex, but towards members of the same sex. We know little about the reasons for this difference at this time, we do know that it is a difference that is discovered, and not chosen. We need to be aware of some dangers here. To speak of

homosexual relationships as a “lifestyle” suggests that they are chosen, more than that, that they are odd, eccentric, even wilful. Alternatively, the reduction of the ordering of desire to mere “feelings” suggests that they are transitory and easily changeable. Yet there is no evidence that this is true for the vast majority of gay and lesbian people. Further, the experience of a particular ordering of our desires as a given needs to drive us back into the tradition to think afresh about how we are to understand sexual desire.

I have taken some time to point out both the gift and the ambivalence of the traditions we have inherited. The positive affirmation of sexuality, and bodily life is limited by the impacts of patriarchy, dualism, and deep suspicion of the force of sexual desire. Our current learnings are suggesting that the natural order is not as straightforward as either Paul or the writer of Leviticus assumed it to be. If homosexual orientation is a natural given, rather than an eccentric and sinful choice, a wilful rebellion against God and the order of creation, then faithfulness to scripture will require that we carefully re-evaluate how we use the handful of texts that refer, all negatively, to homosexual sexual activity.

Further, if sexual desire turns out not to be primarily about self-gratification, but about the possibility of intimacy. If it is truly, “not good for the earthling to be alone”, then we may need to think again about those arguments that seek to impose the aloneness of celibacy on an entire class of people regardless of their vocation.

Part of the problem here might be understood when we reflect on the reasons for the negative elements of the understandings of sexuality we have been thinking about. In a paradoxical way much of the negativity rests on a recognition of the power and importance of the sexual in human lives, insights that have been born out by developments in modern psychology. However, when we understand sexual desire in terms of intimacy rather than in terms of self-gratification we begin to see that one of the key elements here is vulnerability.

In his remarkable essay, *The Bodies Grace*², Rowan Williams talks about the vulnerability that is part of all sexual relationships. He speaks of the interplay of desire and of profound emotion with the absurd, even comic elements of sexual intimacy, and the very real possibility of making fools of ourselves. The sexual, on Williams account, is liminal. It is an area where the boundaries between self and other may be, for a glorious moment, suspended, as the BAS recalls when it says that, "they may know each other with delight and tenderness in acts of love". It is worth remembering that the Hebrew word to know is also used of sexual intimacy, "Adam knew his wife, and she conceived..." (Genesis 4:1) It is the very intimacy of sexual experience, the vulnerability of the sexual that makes it so difficult to talk about. All too often when we try, what comes out is our own experience of the hurt of vulnerability, or an attempt to shut the conversation down in a narrow legalism. Yet if the purpose of such legalism is to protect us from vulnerability and risk then it also shuts us off from the promise of intimacy that will come at no lesser price.

This account of sexuality does not separate it from the biological, but it does not limit it to one aspect of the biological, namely procreation. It does not deny that some types of relationship will always be wrong and immoral, relationships that are manipulative or exploitative, cannot serve the needs of intimacy. We need to learn to make good judgments, but we will not do that by continuing to be suspicious of the role of desire.

Sexuality is an articulation of the need to reach out for the physical and spiritual embrace of others. As such it connects with God's intention that human beings find their authentic fulfilment, not in isolation, but in relationship. Authentic sexuality is a moment of grace, it is about the possibility of intimate relationship, it is about communion. If we as Christians are to speak constructively about this then we will have to acknowledge the complexity of our own traditions and even their complicity with patterns of relationship that are far from healthy and life giving.

² From C. Hefling, ed. *Ourselves Our Souls and Bodies*, Boston, MA: Cowley Press, 1996.