

Sexuality and spirituality

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Sexuality as divine fire

The Greek philosophers used to say that we are fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods and that this energy is the root of all love, hate, creativity, joy, and sadness. A Christian should agree with that, then add that God put that great power, sexuality, within us so that, ultimately, we might also create life and, like God, look upon what we have helped create, overflow with a joy that breaks the very casings of our selfishness, and say: "It is good; indeed, it is very good!" A mature sexuality is when a person looks at what he or she has helped create, swells in a delight that breaks the prison of his or her selfishness, and feels as God feels when God looks at creation.

For this reason sexuality lies at the center of the spiritual life. A healthy sexuality is the single most powerful vehicle there is to lead us to selflessness and joy, just as unhealthy sexuality helps constellate selfishness and unhappiness as does nothing else. We will be happy in this life, depending upon whether or not we have a healthy sexuality.

One of the fundamental tasks of spirituality, therefore, is to help us to understand and channel our sexuality correctly. This, however, is no easy task. Sexuality is such a powerful fire that it is not always easy to channel it in life-giving ways. Its very power, and it is the most powerful force on the planet, makes it a force not just for formidable love, life, and blessing but also for the worst hate, death, and destruction imaginable. Sex is responsible for most of the ecstasies that occur on the planet, but it is also responsible for lots of murders and suicides. It is the most powerful of all fires, the best of all fires, the most dangerous of all fires, and the fire which, ultimately, lies at the base of everything, including the spiritual life.

But how should sexuality be understood? What are the central prongs within a Christian spirituality of sexuality?

Toward a Christian understanding of sexuality

1. Sexuality as an awareness of having been cut off

To understand the meaning of sexuality, one must begin with its definition. The roots of a word are not always helpful in clarifying its meaning, but they are in the case of the words sex and sexuality. The word sex has a Latin root, the verb *secare*. In Latin, *secare* means (literally) "to cut off," "to sever," "to amputate," "to disconnect from the whole." To be "sexed," therefore, literally means to be cut off, to be severed from, to be amputated from the whole. Thus, to use a simple example, were you to take a chain saw and go to a tree and cut off one of its branches, you would have "sexed" that branch. This branch, could it feel and think, would wake up on the ground, severed, cut off, disconnected, a lonely little piece of wood which was once part of a great organism. It would know in its every cell that if it wants to continue living, and especially if it wants to produce flowers and bear fruit, it must somehow reconnect itself to the tree.

That is precisely how we wake up in the world. We wake up in our cribs, not serene, but crying—lonely, cut off, severed from the great whole. Long before we even come to self-consciousness and long before we reach puberty when our sexuality constellates so strongly around the desire for sex, we feel ourselves painfully sexed in every cell of our body, psyche, and soul. Sex is a dimension of our very awareness. We wake up in the world and in every cell of our being we ache, consciously and unconsciously, sensing that we are incomplete, unwhole, lonely, cut off, a little piece of something that was once part of a whole. Karl Jung once compared the incompleteness we feel in sexuality to the separated white and yolk of an egg. Together they make a one, a whole. Apart they are incomplete. The sexes are like that. Alone we are essentially incomplete and aching at every level for a wholeness that, at some dark level, we know we have been separated from. We experience ourselves as white or yolk, separated from our other half.

And this is experienced as exceedingly painful—an aching loneliness, an irrational longing, a madness from the gods (as the Greeks put it). But this madness is also a great energy; in fact, it is the greatest energy of all inside us. It is the engine that drives everything else, body and spirit. If this is true, and it is, then we see that sexuality is more than simply a question of having sex, and it becomes very important that we make a critical distinction between sexuality and genitality. Sex and having sex are not simply identifiable.

2. Sexuality versus genitality

Sexuality is an all-encompassing energy inside of us. In one sense, it is identifiable with the principle of life itself. It is the drive for love, communion, community, friendship, family, affection, wholeness, consummation, creativity, self-perpetuation, immortality, joy, delight, humor, and self-transcendence. It is not good to be alone (Genesis 2:18). When God said this about Adam at the dawn of creation, God meant it about every man, woman, child, animal, insect, plant, atom, and molecule in the universe. Sex is the energy inside of us that works incessantly against our being alone.

Genitality, having sex, is only one aspect of that larger reality of sexuality, albeit a very important one. Genitality is particularized, physical consummation, a certain privileged constellation of many of the energies that are contained within our wider erotic energies in one bodily encounter with another person which we commonly term making love.

Upon making this critical distinction, a couple of cautions must immediately go out. On the one hand, genitality (having sex) may never be trivialized or denigrated and seen as something that is too earthy and carnal to be spiritual, as countless Manicheans, Gnostics, and other spiritualists have believed and taught through the centuries. Christianity has for the most part been so influenced by negative and unchristian views of sex that it has never really developed a lifegiving spirituality of genitality. For this reason, among others, celibacy has been made too much of a spiritual ideal. This is wrong. Having sex is admittedly not the whole reality of sex, but it is perhaps God's greatest gift to the planet, and it offers humans the opportunity for genuine intimacy available this side of eternity. Indeed, some theologians see in sexual encounter a foretaste of the eternal life of heaven, and many of the classical mystics use the image of sexual encounter to describe our ultimate union with God and creation.

On the other hand, Christians must also avoid the popular, contemporary view that genitality somehow can carry all the things that sexuality is supposed to carry. Popular culture today teaches that one cannot be whole without being healthily sexual. That is correct. However, for the most part, it thinks of sex only as having sex. That is a tragic reduction. Sex is a wide energy and we are healthily sexual when we have love, community, communion, family, friendship, affection, creativity, joy, delight, humor, and self-transcendence in our lives. Having these, as we know, depends on many things and not just on whether or not we sleep alone. One can have a lot of sex and still lack real love, community, family, friendship, and creativity, just as one may be celibate and have these in abundance. We all know the popular dictum (and how true it is) that it is often easier to find a lover than a friend. Sexuality is as much about having friends as it is about having lovers. It is painful to sleep alone, but it is perhaps even more painful to sleep alone when you are not sleeping alone. Thus, while genitality should never be denigrated and seen as something that is not spiritual or important, it should not be asked, all by itself, to be responsible for community, friendship, family, and delight within our lives.

The ancient Greek philosophers gave us the word *eros*. For them, however, it meant much more than it does for us today. Generally today we understand it to mean mainly sexual attraction. For the ancient Greeks, *eros* was a reality with six interpenetrating dimensions: It referred, at one and the same time, to *ludens* (love's playfulness, teasing, and humor); *erotic attraction* (sexual attractiveness and the desire to have sex); *mania* (obsessiveness, falling in love, romance); *pragma* (sensible arrangement in view of family life, home, and community); *philia* (friendship); and *agape* (altruism, selflessness, sacrifice). Unlike us, the ancient Greeks did not ask one aspect of love to carry all the others.

3. A Christian definition of sexuality

How then might a Christian define sexuality? Sexuality is a beautiful, good, extremely powerful, sacred energy, given us by God and experienced in every cell of our being as an irrepressible urge to overcome our incompleteness, to move toward unity and consummation with that which is beyond us. It is also the pulse to celebrate, to give and to receive delight, to find our way back to the Garden of Eden where we can be naked, shameless, and without worry and work as we make love in the moonlight.

Ultimately, though, all these hungers, in their full maturity, culminate in one thing: They want to make us co-creators with God: mothers and fathers, artisans and creators, big brothers and big sisters, nurses and healers, teachers and consolers, farmers and producers, administrators and community builders co-responsible with God for the planet, standing with God and smiling at and blessing the world.

Given that definition, we see that sexuality in its mature bloom does not necessarily look like the love scenes (perfect bodies, perfect emotion, perfect light) in a Hollywood movie. What does sexuality in its full bloom look like?

When you see a young mother, so beaming with delight at her own child that, for that moment, all selfishness within her has given way to the sheer joy of seeing her child happy, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see a grandfather so proud of his grandson, who has just received his diploma, that, for that moment, his spirit is only compassion, altruism, and joy, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see an artist, after long frustration, look with such satisfaction on a work she has just completed that everything else for the moment is blotted out, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see a young man, cold and wet, but happy to have been of service, standing on a dock where he has carried the unconscious body of a child he has just saved from drowning, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see someone throw back his or her head in genuine laughter caught off guard by the surprise of joy itself, you

When you see an elderly nun who, never having slept with a man, been married, or given birth to a child, has through years of selfless service become a person whose very compassion gives her a mischievous smile, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see a community gathered round a grave, making peace with tragedy and consoling each other so that life can go on, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see an elderly husband and wife who, after nearly half a century of marriage, have made such peace with each other's humanity that now they can quietly share a bowl of soup, content just to know that the other is there, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see a table, surrounded by a family, laughing, arguing, and sharing life with each other, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see a Mother Teresa dress the wounds of a street-person in Calcutta or an Oscar Romero give his life in defense of the poor, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see any person—man, woman, or child—who in a moment of service, affection, love, friendship, creativity, joy, or compassion is, for that moment, so caught up in what is beyond him or her that for that instant his or her separateness from others is overcome, you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

When you see God, having just created the earth or just seen Jesus baptized in the Jordan river, look down on what has just happened and say, "It is good. In this I take delight!" you are seeing sexuality in its mature bloom.

Sexuality is not simply about finding a lover or even finding a friend. It is about overcoming separateness by giving life and blessing it. Thus, in its maturity, sexuality is about giving oneself over to community, friendship, family, service, creativity, humor, delight, and martyrdom so that, with God, we can help bring life into the world.

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