10-1-2004

Sex and the Sacred

Daniel C. Maguire

Marquette University, daniel.maguire@marquette.edu

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At a meeting of scholars from the world’s various religions, a Chinese scholar reported that in China now they are starting to put free condoms in hotel drawers. Mustering as straight a face as I could I said: “We don’t do that in the United States. Instead, we put Bibles in the motel drawers on the assumption that if a couple come to have sex and find the Bible, they will read that instead.” With an equally strained straight face, the Chinese scholar asked: “Have you any data on this experiment?” I replied: “Yes, a very high rate of unplanned pregnancies.”

This story is a tale of two cultures. In this nation there is no possibility of putting free condoms alongside the mouthwash and shampoo provided in motels and hotels. It would offend our theocratic and Puritan sensibilities. In many ways, the United States is a functioning theocracy. The First Amendment hides this fact from view.

Let us sing praises to the First Amendment. Its purpose was not to banish religion from life; its purpose was to ensure that public policy will not be made by alleged divine inspiration but by reasoned discourse. In areas of sexuality and reproduction, the First Amendment has failed. Alleged divine inspiration is national policy on embryonic stem cell research and therapeutic cloning. Even when national policy and constitutional law permit women to choose abortion, the theocratic culture rebels and manages by harassment, political pressure, and terror to make abortion unavailable in more than 80 percent of the nation.

The inability to face our sexuality, in Western culture, is to a great extent religiously grounded, with historical Christianity bearing enormous blame. Augustine saw sexual passion as the conduit of original sin, so heinous and infectious that the passion of parents that led to conception befools the souls of newborns. Ambrose said the worldly marry but the children of the Kingdom of Heaven refrain from all fleshly lust. The Penitentials—early medieval books list-
ing sins and their appropriate penances—prescribed that during times of prayer and on religious feasts, there must be no sexual activity. Thomas Aquinas conceded that marriage was a sacrament, but he said it was the least and last of the sacraments because it had the least spirituality. Sexual pleasure, even in marriage, was long thought to be sinful. And the rule was, the more pleasure, the more sin. William of Auxerre in the thirteenth century said that a holy man who has sex with his wife and finds it hateful and disgusting commits no sin. He added, with regret, “this, however, seldom happens.”

The twelfth century Petrus Cantor opined that sex with a beautiful woman was a greater sin since it caused greater delight. His contemporary Alain de Lille disagreed, saying sex with a beautiful woman was less sinful “because he was compelled by the sight of her beauty,” and “where the compulsion is greater, the sin is slighter.” Taken to its logical extreme, this would justify the rape of overwhelmingly beautiful women. Catholicism decided that only celibate hands can administer the sacraments. (In her textbook of Christian sexual pathology, Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality, and the Catholic Church, Uta Ranke Heinemann chronicles the attitudes that suffused Christian history). The message is clear: sexuality is incompatible with spirituality. Sex is dirty, spirituality sublime. That is the legacy of much of Western culture.

Not even gentle masturbation could escape this indicting negativity: it has taken a cruel beating. The first psychiatry textbook published in the United States said that masturbation “produces seminal weakness, impotence, dysuria, tabes dorsalis, pulmonary consumption, dyspepsia, dimness of sight, vertigo, epilepsy, hypochondriasis, loss of memory, manalgia, fatuity and death.” Other experts thought this listing incomplete and added that it caused senility, stupidity, melancholy, homosexuality, suicide, hysteria, mania, religious delusions, auditory hallucination, conceit, defective offspring, and eventually racial decay. The masturbator, it was said is incapable “of any generous impulse or act of loyalty; he is dead to the call of his family, his country, or of humanity.”

How many masturbators reading this would like to plead guilty to those charges?

Errors about sexuality do not remain on the written page. They invade human life and sicken it, leading to destructive behavior and to what has been called ecclesiogenic psychoneurosis. In 1953 Kinsey and his colleagues in Sexual Behavior in the Human Female reported that Christianity has had a negative impact on women’s sexual pleasure; the more devout they were, the fewer orgasms they had. A more recent study contradicts that, saying that “in general, having a reli-
religious affiliation was associated with higher rates of orgasm for women.”¹
Clearly ethnic cultural variables make it difficult to pinpoint religious influences on orgasmic rates. An Irish Catholic is not the same as an Italian or a Kenyan Catholic.

In the United States, where religious sexual neurosis took deep root in the dominant culture, the results show up in what I have called “the surprised virgin syndrome,” referring to a controlling dishonesty and inability to admit, much less cherish, our capacity for sexual joy. Counselors are familiar with young women, pregnant before they are ready for pregnancy—and pregnancy is a 25-year condition and commitment—who claim they do not know “how it happened,” as though the onset of sexual ardor were not noticeable. More honest cultures face their sexuality and prepare for it with sexual education and contraceptive availability. Statistics tell the tale. “Each year, one million American teenage girls become pregnant, a per-thousand rate twice that of Canada, England, and Sweden, and ten times that of the Netherlands.”² The research indicates that there are much higher rates of sexual activity in these other countries, but far fewer pregnancies. Contraceptive availability is key, along with honesty about when a relationship is about to go sexual. Recent studies indicates some improvement in this regard in the United States.

Studies in the United States show that three quarters of teens say that their first intercourse was unplanned and a majority of them say they wish they had been older when they had their first intercourse. The broad discomfort with sex discourages communication between teens and parents. This is tragic, since studies show that healthy candor about sex between parents and children helps to postpone the time and the circumstances of first intercourse.

One might think that the puritanical horror of sex has been dissipated in a culture where sex is used ubiquitously in the marketplace to promote sales, and frenzied pornography abounds. However, as Grace Janzen observes, this obsession reflects the historical Christian obsession and is really “the same preoccupation, turned inside out.”³ The addiction to pornography is fueled by discomfort with sex.

Enter Spirituality
Spirituality is more popular than religion, though in reality the two are one. Indeed, morality, spirituality, and religion are concentric circles. Each can be defined as a response to the sacred. “Sacred” is the highest encomium in the
human lexicon. It is the superlative of precious. It is where valuation dips into mystery. Some of our value experiences are literally ineffable; we can't explain them. Jean Paul Sartre, late in his life, met some former students in a park in Paris. They had their three-month-old baby with them. Sartre took the baby in his arms and wrote later that he realized, with a kind of mystical poignancy, that if you took all of his life's work—and he was the best known philosopher of the twentieth century—and yet if you balanced his work against the smiling preciousness he held in his arms, he said all his works would seem almost weightless by comparison. The words “sacred,” “sanctity of life,” attempt to describe such moments. “Why is this flesh so precious?” I would ask myself as I cradled my ten-year-old son Danny in my arms. His dwarfed body was wasted as was his mind by Hunter's syndrome, and he was near death, but I handled him with all the reverence with which I used to handle the sacraments when I was a priest.

Neither Sartre's nor my experience admits of explanation. And that brings us a step further in knowing what spirituality is. Spirituality is born in the affections, in the deepest part of the affections that the medievals called mystical. It is our appropriate response to values that transcend our paltry powers of analysis. (There can be false spirituality. There are misplaced sacreds that don't merit our reverence. We can worship our selves egotistically. We can worship our nations in the pandemic religion known as nationalism. We can also idolize our gender or our race or our sexual orientation.) True spirituality reacts appropriately and enthusiastically to the value of human life and to the rest of terrestrial life with which we are kith and kin.

**The Marks of a Healthy Spirituality**

Let me boldly dare to suggest the three signals and signs of a healthy spirituality:

1) a release from the isolation of egotism;
2) a passion for justice; and
3) an undefeatable conviction that hope and joy can be at home in this universe.

Egotism crushes any sense of interdependency and mutuality; it misses the fact that life, all life, is a shared glory, a miracle of energy that merits an explosion of awe, reverence, appreciation, wonder, and a sense of giftedness. Spirituality that does not pulse with a hunger for justice for all is specious and a fraud. Hope is a recognition that, with all its bloody blows, the possibilities of
life outweigh its debits. As for joy, the old rabbis had it right when they said: “We will have to give account on the judgment day of every good thing which we refused to enjoy when we might have done so.” A true spirituality is convinced that, against all the odds, ecstasy not misery is our destiny. Spirituality is baptism by immersion in the stunningness and promise of life.

Enter Sex

Good sex is spiritually healthy or it’s not good sex. So what is sex? Anyone after puberty has some working definition of what sex is. For some, “having sex” is just one of the myriad pleasures available to us. Thus a couple might take a walk together, share a beer or a game of tennis, or they might just have sex... putting all these activities on a par. In this simplistic and reductionistic view, as long as the participants consent, there is no other consideration. Conservative theologians, on the contrary, define “having sex” as the “marital act,” meaning that sexual activity is moral language that says that the participants are heterosexual and married. Any other form of sex, premarital, masturbatory or homosexual, is wrong. This arbitrarily limits the possible moral meanings of sexual activity. It ignores positions such as those of Catholic Philosophers Daniel Dombrowski and Robert Deltete of the Jesuit Seattle University: “A rich spiritual life is not necessarily hindered by, and may actually be enhanced by, premarital sexual relations,” if those relationships “exhibit mutual consent and mutual agapic respect.” They add “to loosen the connection between moral sexual relations and marriage does not imply abandonment of a sacramental view of marriage wherein the best sex is that which enriches a lifelong agapic commitment between two individuals.” That is the “best” but not the only good way of expressing love sexually. They add that the same can be said for good homosexual relationships.

In humans, like everything in humans, sex is more than it appears to be. At a purely physical level, it releases unconscious springs of playfulness and relaxes tensions and frictions born of the struggling, deliberative part of our lives. Sex is fun. But sex is serious fun. It is fun with an agenda. In fertile heterosexuals it can make babies. Its biological intimacy makes it a conduit for disease. And sex is serious because it is packed with psychological and liturgical power. In frivolous encounters, this force may not ignite, but it is there, “winking at the brim.”

I define sex as a natural liturgy. A liturgy consists of symbols, and we use symbols all the time. From handshakes to bows and waves, to nose-rubbing, kisses, hugs, and smiles, we speak not just in words, but also in symbols. The word
symbol comes from the Greek syn, “with” or “together,” and ballein, “to throw.” A symbol throws together more meaning than we can say in mere words . . . unless those words are poetized, and thus symbolized. A liturgy is a coordinat-ed group of symbols. Some liturgies are conventional and contrived. They are “made up” and they vary from culture to culture. Irish weddings and Nigerian weddings are different.

Natural liturgies do not vary. They are inborn. Some of the externals will vary, but in substance, they are intrinsic to our humanity. For humans, a meal is a natural liturgy. There are two aspects to a proper meal: one is physical (food is essential) and the other is symbolic. The symbolic aspect, somewhat surpris-ingly, is more important than the food. You don’t invite people to a meal because they are hungry or low on proteins. You invite them to show love and respect and this brings you directly into symbols. Crystal, silverware, precious china, candles, music, changed lighting. It’s as though you were setting up an altar. (It is not surprising that many religions use a meal as their central liturgy. It is already a liturgy; they simply add religious motifs).

Even the food in the meal liturgy is wrapped in symbolism. The food is not served unceremoniously in a vat, or given intravenously. It is garnished in lovely symbols and presented with elegance. The main business of this dining liturgy is communication of love and respect. Love and joy are necessary even for digestion. If you had to dine with someone you despised, your digestion would rebel.

Now to the natural liturgy called sex. Like a meal, sex involves both physical realities and powerful symbolism. Though one or another encounter may not show it, sex is powerful. Sexually charged love is especially bonding, and, when frustrated, leads to the breaking of hearts or worse. It really does “make love” and you do get “involved.” One encounter or another may not show this, but there is power in the sexual meeting.

Interestingly, the physical facts of sex aptly symbolize what sex tends to do psychologically. There is not just physical nakedness; there is emotional naked-ness. We trust our partner with full exposure of our passions and needs. We shed our emotional clothes and cosmetics and present ourselves as we are. Sex is a huge act of trust, a hopeful abandonment of our normal defenses. It takes many delightful forms and may involve various kinds of penetration and envelop-ment; this symbolizes the emotional interweaving that occurs in sexually charged friendship. The lover may remain only an experience, but she or he tends to become a way of life. Sex bonds, and bonds powerfully. The immature may not be ready to deal with its force.
The Wedding of Sexuality and Spirituality

The touchstones of healthy spirituality, respect, justice, hope and joy are the hallmarks of good sex. Sex with a partner you do not respect is corrosive. It used to be said *animal humanum post coitum triste*, humans after love-making are sad. “A pity beyond all telling is hid in the heart of love,” said the poet Yeats. That can happen. Sex awakens hopes for intimacy and the priceless gift of mutual trust. The sadness of prostitution is that it brings together hopeless partners; it fails to blend sex with our moral hopes. That is sad. Sex wrapped in mutual caring is exalting; it blends body and spirit in orgasmic unity. It affirms our beauty as persons.

Pleasure is what sex is about. Stoic philosophy invaded Western culture with the idea that sexual pleasure is presumed guilty until proven innocent. Only procreative intent could bring acquittal. Such nonsense. Sex rarely has anything to do with procreation. The old axiom “listen to your body” was misapplied here. We listened too much to the penis when we should have sought an audience with the clitoris. Sexual ethics has been caught in a penis monologue. The penis has divided loyalties and multiple missions. It is concerned with procreation and waste removal. The clitoris is single-minded. Its one goal, as ethicist Susan Ross says, is “exquisite female sexual pleasure.”

The penis has long dominated the sexual imagination of the Western world. In Scotland in 1811, Miss Marianne Woods and Miss Jane Pirie, two schoolteachers, were making love and got caught in *actu flagrante*. The case went to court, arriving eventually in the House of Lords, which decided in 1819 that the two could not have had sex since they lacked an instrument of penetration. As Bernadette Brooten writes in her *Love Between Women: Early Christian Responses to Female Homoeroticism*: “Across centuries, men share a fundamental assumption about female sexuality, namely that female pleasure requires a penis.” Without penile penetration of the vagina, sex has not happened. Bill Clinton concurred with the 1819 House of Lords.

The hatred of women’s sexual pleasure, going all the way to enforced clitoridectomy, actually evinces a perverted sense of its importance. No wonder weak men feared it. It contains a liberative message. Part of homophobia comes from the fact that gay and lesbian sex does not seek validation in reproducitvity and is simply and honestly about relationship, love, and pleasure. That is threatening to those who are pleasure-phobic.

Sexual pleasure, rather than being suspect, is bounteously filled with good
human news. Christian ethicist Mary Pellauer, in her essay on “The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm,” in The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion says that “flesh has the capacity to burst me open to existence” so that our “connections to the rest of the universe are felt... as pleasurable.” Patricia Beattie Jung says “Our sexuality draws us into one another's arms—and consequently into an awareness of and concern about the needs of that other.” Audre Lorde, in her essay “Uses of the Erotic,” says that the experience of sexual pleasure can stir up in women a sense of their self-worth. Once women taste such delights, they can begin to demand “what is in accord with joy in other areas” of their lives. Women will “begin to give up... being satisfied with suffering, and self-negation, and with the numbness” that the macho culture demands of them. Mary Pellauer agrees, saying that “to touch and be touched in ways that produce sweet delight affirms, magnifies, intensifies and redoubles the deep value of our existence.” Sa’diyya Shaik writes that in Islam it is recognized that “sexual union has the possibilities for unparalleled mystical unveilings and experiences of the Divine.” To call sex “dirty” is a calumny.

Notice that this talk of sex covers all the bases of a healthy spirituality. Respect for self and others, joyful affirmation of our hopes for justice and for life. It’s all there. That’s good sex, and that’s good spirituality.

Our sense of what is normal sex is socially constructed, and much of that social construction is poisonous, and sits on our sexuality like a poisonous miasma. Healthier winds are blowing this noxious gas out to sea and we are beginning to see that in moments of truthful sexual joy a sacred beauty is born.

Notes