

Human sexuality and christianity



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Today sexual promiscuity seems to be more socially acceptable than ever before. We are continuously bombarded with sexual imagery in every aspect of our lives, but with what appears to be a decline in sexual morality does the link between sexuality and spirituality risk being completely severed. In this essay I have decided to look at both John Paul ii and Benedict xvi to see how their teachings on sexual morality have not only influenced each other, but the Churches understanding of sexual morality and ethics in the world in which we live.

A common misconception is that Christianity views 'sexuality as immoral, polluting, dirty, the domain of demons; sexual transgressors are destined for hell.' [1] This is not the case and can in part be put down to and traced back to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. 'Augustine, who is arguably the greatest of all the early Christian writers, believed that sexual desires per se resulted from the sins of Adam and Eve. Only married couples were permitted to engage in sexual intercourse for the purpose of procreation only.' [2] But, if we look at the story of Adam and Eve we find that this is not the case, in fact far from it. In Genesis 2: 23-24 we have the words 'Then the man said 'this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman, for out of man this one was taken.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were naked and they were not ashamed.' This quotation displays the admiration for man and woman as created by God. We can also link this quotation into the idea that humans can be seen as two wholes or individuals, which are endlessly searching for someone or something to complete them and come together with them to form a larger

whole ' our sexuality is one of the ways our hunger for connection comes home to us as a daily experience. It makes restlessly palpable our essential incompleteness. We can see it in our bodies and feel it in our souls. Our sexuality is curiosity, fascination, appreciation and attraction as we take a look around us and notice what is there. It is longing. And when we connect it is joy.'[3]In his apostolic exhortation ' Familiaris Consortio' Pope John Paul ii speaks of how mans fundamental vocation is to love. ' love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being'[4]. The fact that Adam and Eve feel no shame at being naked shows us as readers that sexuality is not something to feel guilty or ashamed of. Indeed this is not how Christianity sees sexuality and there are many positive references to it throughout The Bible.

The Song of Songs is probably the best know example of this in The Bible. ' The Song of Songs is now widely recognised as a poem celebrating human love and sexuality.'[5]The sexual imagery in The Song of Songs has been interpreted in a number of ways. For example, some critics have given the song an allegorical interpretation preferring to see it as a song about the love of God for his people Israel, where as others have read the song literally as a simple love story between a man and a woman. Whichever interpretation is correct the fact that The Bible contains such a poem clearly shows that sexuality cannot be separated from spirituality and should not be considered a taboo subject within Christianity.

In Proverbs Chapter five we find a warning against sexual impurity and infidelity ' the lips of a loose woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil; but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two edged

sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol. She does keep straight to the path of life; her ways wander, and she does not know it.' In this quotation I do not think that we are being warned off sexuality, even though the chapter portrays sexuality as if it is something evil through the metaphors of the loose woman and the adulterous. Instead I think that chapter five is trying to show us how we should use are sexuality for good rather than bad ' the moment sex ceases to be a servant, it becomes a tyrant.'[6]There are clear parallels between the message of this chapter and the supposed lack of sexual ethics in modern society. It tells us that instead of looking for instant satisfaction we should instead look to build our relationships, this will leave us feeling more fulfilled spiritually.

For John Paul ii the unity of the body and the soul is important. Man is made both of the body and the spirit these two elements cannot be separated and both need to be properly integrated if we are to fully realise our potential. ' Sexuality is not something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person.'[7]Our sexuality has to be coupled by our self giving. If not then this giving of ourselves actually becomes a lie. Our vocation to love is realised in two specific ways; either through marriage or virginity and celibacy. Each of these ways ' when used in it's own proper form is an actuation of the most profound truth of man, that he is made in the image and likeness of God.'[8]Pope John Paul goes onto say that marriage involves a complete and total self giving of man and woman to each other. It is through this self giving that we come to share in communion with God.

In Christian understanding human sexuality is seen as a gift from God. Because of this Christians would say that human sexuality must never be trivialised, treated as dirty or disgusting ' to call our sexuality the gift of God is to say something extremely positive about it, but it is also to deny both divinity and ultimacy to the sexual activity itself...sex is not demonic. Our sexuality is not the place where evil forces are manifest, sex is not dirty, shameful or impure.'[9]It is only when we ignore the fact that sex is a gift from God and start taking our sexuality for granted that sexuality can become a destructive force within our lives ' sex is either something sacred or something perverse. It can never be simply neutral, casual. It either builds up a person's soul and person, or it takes away, destroys and disintegrates them.'[10]John Paul ii states that we cannot hold anything back for ourselves, sexuality also includes personal values for example the openness to the generation of children. G. K Chesterton is famously believed to have said ' the man in a brothel is looking for God.' In this quotation Chesterton is saying that the man in the brothel is looking for fulfilment; however he is looking in the wrong place. Therefore he can never experience full satisfaction because his needs can only be satisfied sexually and not spiritually. This in turn leads to him feeling isolated and empty. We are often led to believe that sexual freedom comes from being able to exercise our sexual desires whenever and wherever we want, however in familiaris consortio John Paul ii makes it clear that it is ' when we are faithful to the fidelity of God's plan for us that our freedom far from being restricted is increased and we are able to more freely share in God's creative wisdom'. [11]The ultimate example of love is Christ's death for us on the cross, this is

the supreme example that Christian's can look to in their daily lives. An act of self sacrificial love which is to be the model for all our relationships.

These ideas and themes of 'familiaris consortio' would be built upon later by Pope Benedict xvi in the encyclical letter 'Deus Caritas Est.' Pope Benedict XVI wrote about the subject of Christian love. In the letter Pope Benedict reflects upon the concepts of eros (sexual love), agape (self sacrificing, unconditional love) and their relationship to the teachings of Jesus. Agape and eros are two of the different words for Greek love. Both have slightly different meanings, whereas agape is descending, ablativ love which one gives wholeheartedly of oneself to another individual, eros is ascending, possessive love which seeks to receive from another. In his encyclical Pope Benedict goes on to explain that although agape and eros are both inherently good, eros risks being downgraded to mere sex if not balanced out with a spiritual element:

'Eros and agape—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized. Even if eros is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to 'be there for' the other. The element of agape thus enters into this love, for otherwise eros is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by ablativ, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love

must also receive love as a gift. Certainly, as the Lord tells us, one can become a source from which rivers of living water flow (cf. Jn 7: 37-38). Yet to become such a source, one must constantly drink anew from the original source, which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart flows the love of God (cf. Jn 19: 34).'[12]

Here we find Benedict expressing a very similar idea to that of John Paul ii. The idea that man is made up of both body and soul and that the two cannot be separated ' should he {man} aspire to be pure spirit and reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then the spirit and the body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness.'[13]

In the encyclical Pope Benedict also discusses Nietzsche's theory that ' Christianity has poisoned eros, which for its part, while not completely succumbing, gradually degenerated into vice. Here the German philosopher was expressing a widely held perception: doesn't the church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life? Doesn't she blow the whistle just when the joy which is the Creator's gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the divine'[14]However, Benedict disagrees with Nietzsche's point of view ' the Old Testament in no way rejected eros as such; rather, it declared war on a warped and destructive form of it, because this counterfeit divinization of eros actually strips it of its dignity and dehumanizes it. Indeed, the prostitutes in the temple, who had to bestow this divine intoxication, were not treated as human beings and persons, but simply used as a means of

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arousing 'divine madness': far from being goddesses, they were human persons being exploited. An intoxicated and undisciplined eros, then, is not an ascent in 'ecstasy' towards the Divine, but a fall, a degradation of man. Evidently, eros needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns.' In this quotation we are told that Christianity has not destroyed eros, rather it looks to declare war against those false ideas of love and sexuality. We are also told that there is a clear link between love and spirituality, 'there is a certain relationship between love and the Divine: love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence. Yet we have also seen that the way to attain this goal is not simply by submitting to instinct. Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or 'poisoning' eros, they heal it and restore its true grandeur.' [15]

Christianity's ideas on eros and agape can be traced back to the philosophy of Aristotle and Plato. In 'The Symposium' Plato argued that sex was a positive force. He described sex as a manifestation of love, and thus considered it a component of mankind's eternal search for harmony between body and soul. In his negative or puritanical mode, however, Plato viewed sex as a snare that distracted men from the love of wisdom. Sex he maintained in *The Republic*, trapped men in a bog of sensuality, from which they found it difficult, or even impossible to escape.' [16] Plato also went on to outline seven dimensions of eros; according to Plato these were playfulness (in Greek *ludens*), the family (*storge*), erotic attraction, madness (*mania*),

pragmatism (pragma), friendship (philia) and sacrifice (agape). Pope Benedict argues that eros and agape are not two completely different types of love, rather that they are separate halves of a complete love. This seems to fit with Plato's theory on eros. Plato talks about eros as a universal force that moves all things towards peace, perfection and divinity. If this is the case then one would assume that through love we can come to understand and find God. This also fits in with familiaris consortio where it talks about the importance of love and communion ' God is love, and in Himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion'[17]. It is through a proper understanding and integration of love and our sexuality that we can come to a deeper knowledge and communion with God.

According to Plato eros can help the soul recall knowledge of beauty, and contributes to an understanding of spiritual truth. If this is the case and Plato's eros can help us engage with spiritual beauty and truth then it seems that love and sex must be connected. You cannot have one without the other, we need to be able to experience all dimensions of eros if we are to experience a love that is both giving and receiving. If we do not have these dimensions then our experiences of love will never be fully satisfied. And eros will for us be dragged down to mere sex, if this happens then we have to ask ourselves does this type of love actually mean anything, or is it just pointless, empty sex. ' Our sexual experience is more than merely physical. It may be rooted in our bodiliness, but that it is also exactly where our spirituality resides. We are incarnate spirit, and as such are one person indivisible. Even in our most spiritual activities our bodies are involved. In our most bodily activities, our spirits are involved.'[18]

I find that both John Paul ii and Benedict xvi make excellent points about the nature of human sexuality, and that in many ways what they say feeds into each other. Our sexuality is a gift from God, it must therefore be treated with respect and dignity. It is not to be abused and we must not allow ourselves to become slaves to our sexual desires. Man and woman are called by God to a vocation of love which when followed to its ultimate end frees us and allows us to give of ourselves completely in conjugal love.

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[1]Gender in Pre-Hispanic America p. 89

[2]The Future of Peace and Justice in the Global Village p. 157

[3]Spiritual Quest p. 146

[4]Familiaris Consortio 11

[5]Song of Songs p. xiii

[6]Lecture notes

[7]Familiaris Consortio 11

[8]Familiaris Consortio 11

[9]‘ Human Sexuality’ p. 5

[10]Lecture notes

[11]Familiaris Consortio 11

[12]Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est

[13]Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est

[14]Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est

[15]Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est

[16]Law, Sex and Christian Society in Medieval Europe p. 16

[17]Familiaris Consortio 11

[18]‘ Spiritual Quest’ p. 147 By Thomas Hart