

Medicine and Religion

Sex and the Church*

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I obviously cannot pretend to "speak for the Church" on a subject on which at this moment churchgoers are so divided; indeed, there are aspects of the Church's past record on this subject which make me shudder. I have been tempted more than once to try to write a history of how a religion which was supposed to be for love became a religion against sex. Yet I remind myself that in 1975 the Churches in this country were responsible for the solemnisation of 68% of all the marriages in this country—49% Anglican, 19% other denominations. And the Church of England alone—in this age of decline—still prepares for Confirmation just under 100 000 people aged 12 to 20 each year—a huge opportunity and responsibility.

Such statistics have made it clear to me that I cannot dodge my subject, especially at a time when there are so many changes in sexual attitudes and, indeed, sexual behaviour. One sign of that is that the Church of England has before it at this moment a powerful report on *Marriage and the Church's Task*, and in a few weeks' time the report of its Board of Social Responsibility on Homosexuality will be published. And in what I have to say I am particularly indebted to a working paper on "Humanity and Sexuality" by Basil and Rachel Moss, which has been forwarded to the General Synod of the Church of England in response to its recent resolution that "the time has come for a new look at the whole Christian theology of sexuality in the light of present theological and psychiatric understanding." I found the passing of that resolution both significant and encouraging.

But where do we start?

Basic Christian beliefs

You do not have to be a churchman to observe that all of us owe our very existence to the sexuality of humanity. What the Christian maintains fundamentally is that our sexuality has to be understood in the light of that love we believe God has revealed himself to be. And, in contrast to some Eastern religions—in which the body is regarded as evil, and feelings are regarded as a hindrance to perfection—for the Christian the Love of God is linked to the fulfilment of the whole person in the body. Jesus himself revealed that the body, and indeed our whole physical nature, can be a channel of God's grace. The body is the image of the person, and the person is something vast and mysterious, not to be belittled or degraded. The Church does not deny the importance of discipline, detachment, and asceticism; but it proclaims that man's sexuality and his physical nature are fundamentally part of the goodness of God's creation.

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But how does that relate explicitly to the differentiation between men and women? Well, "vive la différence!" But it is important to be clear first of all what the difference is. That there are biological differences between male and female, and that these correspond to differences in reproductive function, is obvious and incontrovertible. What is less certain is how these male and female characteristics—the gender and genital differentia—do affect and should affect behaviour patterns. Every human being is biologically male or female, but our masculinity or femininity at the personal level is far more problematic. And because Christians are concerned with love, and because the first concern of love is for justice, and therefore for the value of each human being, we need to beware of letting gender tyrannise over the variety of human personality. This is especially so when, for instance, in our own generation Jung has written so convincingly of the masculine and feminine elements coexisting in the psyche of every human being, and anthropologists have been able to give equally convincing evidence of the relativity of what we so often simplistically label masculine and feminine. And here the Church itself needs to be aware how dangerous it is to receive its own tradition uncritically as "Gospel." For example, Clement of Alexandria claimed that women must become men to enter the Kingdom of God, and Tertullian and Thomas Aquinas himself believed that women were defective males. But, whatever the past, the Church (and not only the Church) is faced with exceedingly intractable questions when we turn to adult sexual relationships today.

Separation of sex and procreation

It is easy to say idealistically that sexuality is to be seen in the light of that love we believe God has revealed himself to be. But what precisely does that mean in Western urban society today, with the separability of sexual activity from the procreation of children—a separability that is taken for granted among most younger members of society? And what precisely does it mean when it is no longer either needful or responsible to have children "as they come"?

One current answer is, of course, that sex is nothing more than a pleasure-conveying activity, designed, like eating, to gratify a primary instinct and to release a primary tension. This natural need of the body should be gratified as it makes itself felt, with whom and in whatever way it may happen to seem appropriate at that moment: "doing what comes naturally." Such an attitude does not see the techniques of sex primarily related to building up and sustaining relationships between persons that are of vast and mysterious significance. On the other hand, many young people who welcome the separability of sex and procreation yet are clear that promiscuity devalues both sexual and personal relationships claim that if a relationship is one of mutual friendship and loving concern they can see no reason why this should not be expressed through sexual intercourse; and any guilt feelings which may arise can be explained as a hangover from past conventions.

Yet it is not just a fuddy-duddy Church but a considerable body of experienced counsellors who would testify that sex between human beings even when intended to be a casual cheerful gratification of bodily need or an expression of "low-level friendship" very often turns out to be much more. Deep disturbances of the human spirit frequently manifest themselves unbidden—passion, adoration, exaltation, as well as disgust, hatred, pain, jealousy. It might be more convenient if the significance of sexual activity ended at the edge of the bed in which two bodies happen to lie; but it is not simply the Church which has found it charged with significance that reaches in all directions.

And the Church today as part of its loving task has to question whether the attempt to free sex from all moral, personal, and spiritual significance does not trivialise its possibilities and deprive people of a depth and height of experience of loving and being in love to which, for instance, centuries of literature, drama, poetry, myth, ritual, and art bear witness. The Christian tradition at its best insists that what is done in the flesh is spiritually and personally important. Body and person can never be separated; and therefore the sex act can be used both marvellously and destructively, both within and without marriage. Sex can be used in a merely self-gratificatory way, reducing the other to a sex object, or it can be used gloriously.

The Christian believes that the very misuse of sex bears witness to its positive human possibilities of commitment to another, of self-transcendence, and of re-creation. Prostitution, pornography, and obscenity are, of course, human phenomena; and it is still all too common for Christians to rush in simply with condemnation without compassionately understanding the compulsions which often lie within them. And there is much for Christians to learn from the Freudian diagnosis that those who are most disturbed by pornography and obscenity are themselves often unconsciously attracted to it. Yet the fact remains that pornography and prostitution focus on the body primarily as the object. This body is worth more than that one only because these legs—or that penis—are more appealing. The body is "raided" for the moment for its fantasy of reality: not for the "real thing" of relationship.

Sex and love

There is a familiar and memorable phrase in the Church of England Marriage Service which I hope will never be lost by any liturgical revision: "With my body I thee worship." There is no fear of the erotic there. Nor is there any suggestion that sex is "nothing but" a pleasure-conveying activity. The suggestion is that the yearning for the beloved, joyful sexual passion shared, delight in the partner through the body in all kinds of ways—touching, caressing, the exchange of glances, the full mutual exchange of genital sex—is the creation and gift of God to be understood in the light of his love. Man is a psychosomatic unity in the profoundest sense, but that unity is not complete in one or even in one-and-another. The mystery of being runs through all our beings—through those whom we worship with our bodies and through all creation. Our bodily life and our spiritual life are inseparable. Flesh is the mode under which we apprehend the truth of being. That is the profoundest meaning of "psychosomatic." Our natural instincts and affections are not only related to our human interdependence but to our relationship to God himself.

It is important to underline, nevertheless, that, although human friendship will most often involve our sexuality, it does not necessarily involve genital sex; and the pressure always to consummate friendship genitally is one of the problems of today. Perhaps if our society were more released at the level of touch in general there would not be the obsession with genital experience, so that anyone who does not immediately go to bed with anyone else who wants to is made to feel at least eccentric, or worse, defective.

Which leads me to say that what the Church has to say about

sex must include something about one of the central concerns of the Church. I have said that according to the Church our sexuality has to be seen in the light of that love God has revealed himself to be. But that love speaks to a fundamental human need: the need to be treated as infinitely valuable. This is more than a matter of words—though words often play their part. To become fully human we need to be treated as fully human: "Don't *talk* of love: show me!" This can happen in part through the quality of relationships in our family life: through the stability and care expressed through the family. Ultimately, only sensitive, sustained, profound, accepting love can heal the fear that often mars and indeed destroys the possibility of happy sexual relations. And the desperation of much sexual activity today is primarily evidence not so much of disordered sex as of a sexual smash and grab raid on disordered security and valuation: that security and value the family and the wider community have failed to provide. Therefore, when the Church talks of sex it often has to stop talking about sex, and talk, for instance, about our formation as human beings in the family, and the community, and in friendships—of one sort and another. Eros, and agape (disinterested love), and philia (friendship), and koinonia (love received through community) need each other. Sex needs to be set within their total context.

It is more than possible that our age, in its revulsion against Victorian prudery and in its desire to correct our inherited distrust of the body—and indeed of the sex act itself (and the Church has much to answer for here)—is concentrating and focusing too narrowly on the rediscovery of sex through techniques and occasions for having a kind of isolated sex. Indeed, another phrase which means a lot to me is the phrase "making love." It is one which I fear St Augustine would never have understood. He never really caught on to the fact that in the Christian vocabulary sex can never be isolated from love; but that God has so joined them together that truly to "make love" will often profoundly involve sex.

It may be that in our age the Church is discovering that to be so. This will mean that in our age the Church will be able to encourage what will look like and be a greater freedom for sexual expression than has hitherto been acceptable in the Christian tradition. It will see no reason why homosexuals, for instance, should not give physical and indeed genital expression to their personal commitment to each other if that is set in the context of love—that love we believe God has revealed himself to be. And when marriages have broken down the Church will encourage a new and deeper relationship—a new commitment and fidelity, new growth and healing—in love.

Here again I am bound to say that at this crucial point in people's lives the Church has too often seemed only censorious and lacking in compassion; and a sense of failure and guilt has been met with the very opposite of what it ought to have received. This is not simply to advocate a "soft line." A loving Church will always be a church that talks about discipline. You cannot talk about love and not talk about discipline, and, indeed, sacrifice. But that is always essentially the offering of something that is good for the achievement of something even better: something that is more profoundly loving.

Marriage in modern society

I should like to return therefore to the marriage report, *Marriage and the Church's Task*, which is at the moment before the Church of England, because it is one of the most hopeful documents I know concerning sex and the Church. This report gives attention to several factors which affect our formation as human beings today and therefore affect sex: the changing patterns of authority, for example, and the changing role of women—the contrast now with the former economic dependence of the wife on the husband. The report underlines one unassailable fact: that "the institution of marriage now stands or falls on the quality of the relationship between the man and wife." This means that the potential for richness of personal

fulfilment in marriage may now be greater than it has ever been; but the risk of failure and the price of failure is also greater. Marriage breakdown may mean not only the loss of a sexual partner and companion but the destruction of a shared universe of meaning and understanding of which the sex act may well have been what I can only call the "sacrament." Few other official reports on marriage have said so explicitly that marriage not only unites two persons as they are but also has the capacity to create them as they may become—that it is potentially "person making." But the word "making" is crucial. People fall in love. They do not simply fall into true marriage. Marriage involves the will as well as the emotions. Marriages have to be worked at and made.

We have heard a great deal in recent years about being capable of change if you are a mature person, capable of growth. This report gives due attention to that, but it underlines also words which have become somewhat out of fashion: constancy, reliability, fidelity. I particularly like this paragraph:

"The marriage bond is made up of different strands. It is a moral bond, deriving from a promise of fidelity. It is an emotional bond, deriving from shared experiences. It is a physical bond, deriving from sexual union. It is a spiritual bond, deriving from allegiance to common values. It is a bond of habit: "I've grown accustomed to her face." It is above all a personal bond, weaving together some or all of these various strands. And what gives to this personal bond its point and purpose is mutual love. It is this love which is 'the bond of perfectness.'"

That may sound a bit poetic for a report, but I believe it is also down-to-earth. And the report does not fail to connect—in a down-to-earth way—marriage and, for instance, the housing shortage.

Marriage guidance and sex education

It is also down-to-earth about marriage guidance. If the report is put into action, the days—in the Church of England—of young couples getting only pious waffle from the priest when they come to be married may be numbered. It states explicitly that many urban parishes are so large that a single-handed priest cannot possibly have time for adequate preparation of the number of couples he is called on to marry; and that marriage counselling, whether undertaken as preparation or to meet the needs of people already married, is a skill which needs to be acquired by study and practice and is not conferred simply by ordination. And preparation for marriage cannot be done in a few sessions, a few weeks before the wedding day. I know of a

number of parishes today where marriage guidance is now delegated to a group of lay people skilled in marriage guidance.

The report also emphasises the other times when contacts are established—at, for instance, the birth of a first child—which can be of immense value in relation to the times of loneliness, depression, and strain that may occur during the early years of parenthood. It emphasises that sex education is not something completed at school or before marriage. It needs to go on through life. A middle-aged priest—or a middle-aged doctor—knows well that the power of sex does not wane; neither does the challenge to see it in the context of God's love and the divinity of our humanity.

Sex education, I have tried to emphasise, is not simply about the facts of human and animal reproduction but about the role of sex in personality and in personal relationships. To talk about "sex and the Church" is therefore to talk not only about parsons and sex, but about people and sex: about people, for instance, who believe that to do justice to the personal and the human you need to have a vision of the divine dimensions of the truly human and see sex in that context—and such people will as often be teachers and doctors and parents as parsons.

It saddens me that so many parsons are in fact heretics—they think they can speak to a person about their spiritual problems and avoid their sexual problems, instead of seeing that the spiritual and the sexual are inseparable. And from the other side, it saddens me that there are so many doctors who think that if you have advised people on their sexual problems—separated from the deeply personal—that is all that has to be done.

I do not apologise for talking quite a bit on the nature and destiny of man (man embracing woman). I do not apologise for talking about the love of God. For, however crazy and mixed up St Augustine was, and however wrong some of his statements, I believe he was right in one: "Thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee." But, poor fellow, he never realised that God had given him his sexuality as one of His best gifts to help him find his way to Him.

References

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What is Marfan's syndrome?

Marfan's syndrome is a progressive connective tissue disorder with a dominant genetic inheritance. Skeletal, ocular, and cardiovascular abnormalities predominate. These include long limbs and spidery fingers, scoliosis, pes cavus, a high palate, and dislocation of the lens. Others include skin striae, long ligaments, shaking irides, and myopia. Defective elastic tissue in the aorta can lead to dilatation with aortic regurgitation, aneurysm formation, or dissection. Mitral chordal elongation and dilatation of the annulus can lead to leaflet prolapse and regurgitation. The stigmata of Marfan's syndrome are not all present in affected individuals, who may possess any combination including cardiovascular complications in the absence of the skeletal abnormalities, which are most recognisable clinically. The syndrome has no known underlying metabolic abnormality which would permit a biochemical diagnosis. Although increased urinary hydroxyproline excretion may be present in Marfan's syndrome, this is not specific to the disorder. Neither is the histopathology specific, the main findings being of cystic medial necrosis in the aorta with only scanty elastic fibres and of mucoid degeneration in the mitral leaflets and chordae. Despite this there is no doubt that Marfan's syndrome is real. Recognition must depend on the clinical abnormalities noted. When typical skeletal abnormality is combined with

ocular complications in a patient with typical cardiovascular manifestations, there can be no doubt of the diagnosis. Skeletal manifestations alone can be highly suggestive when florid and may be diagnostic if other members of the family have similar features with cardiovascular complications. Similar skeletal malformation together with dislocation of the lens may occur in homocystinuria, but in this syndrome mental development is chequered, whereas in Marfan's syndrome intelligence is normal. In Marfan's syndrome muscle development is poor and elongated ligaments can lead to recurrent dislocations characteristically affecting the patella. Lack of muscular strength together with the propensity to ocular and cardiovascular problems makes these patients unsuitable for occupations calling for physical stamina. They should therefore be encouraged to develop more clerical or academic pursuits.

It has been suggested that cardiovascular complications are the cause of premature death in most patients with Marfan's syndrome but this observation rather depends on the diagnostic criteria used for the recognition of the syndrome. There is a regrettable tendency to diagnose Marfan's syndrome in any tall person with knobby knees or a high palate, and it is important to confine the diagnosis to patients with a combination of at least two out of the three groups of manifestations, skeletal, ocular, and cardiovascular, or typical features in one system only plus a definite family history.