THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND SEXUALITY

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BACKGROUND

In terms of general context we could perhaps suggest two contrasting approaches to the whole question of the relationship between the sacred and the sexual. On the one hand there is the approach that identifies them, one with the other. Paul Ricoeur suggests that there was indeed once a time when sexuality and spirituality were closely identified and where the erotic was incorporated into religious myth and ritual. In the Song of Songs, the lived prophecies of Hosea, and the experience of some of the great medieval and later mystics, not least the famous ‘transverberations’ of Teresa of Avila, we see clearly too this approach is a part of the Jewish and Christian tradition.

On the other hand lies a kind of dualism that perceives the sacred as something that is transcendent and separate, while sexuality, now demythologised, is confined to procreation within institutionalised marriage as its power tends here to be feared, restrained and disciplined.

Christian context

Sexuality was associated by early church with the fallen world. The material world was coming to an end and anyway as sexuality was largely linked with procreation and the family so there seemed little point in valuing it. In addition Jesus’ assumed singleness was taken as the preferred sign of the coming Kingdom, and we can see in Paul’s letters his comments on the new form of relationships that were appropriate to the end times.

The church was also influenced by its cultural milieu. All this was reinforced by the Stoic Roman belief that the virtuous state was achieved by the overcoming of the passions and pleasure. So Gregory Nazianzen could say that the fall of humanity was caused by Eve being tempted by pleasure. For since detachment and the avoidance of softness was seen to be the key, so masculinity becomes the measure of what it means to be human, and not only masculinity but virtuous masculinity too. Thus virginity becomes the ideal.

There were of course exceptions to all this – Aquinas had a more positive theology of the body but this was untypical of the age and a part of his thought that was not much taken up.

So we see a separation of eros (love that is passionate and particular) and agape (love that is universal and disinterested) in contrast to the Jewish tradition which continued

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1 James Nelson – The Intimate Connection
2 Peter Brown - Body and Society
to entwine the two with only one word for love. For the Christian the erotic becomes narrowly associated with the genital, and spirituality tends to become disembodied.

In the Post reformation period Luther could talk of sex as medicine for the soul but chosen celibacy was still privileged. Within the Anglican tradition, where clergy were permitted to marry, what evolved still seemed to make no accommodation for passion and desire – a form if you like of married monasticism or a celibate clergy who happen to marry not a sexual priesthood. Even in the twentieth century modern evangelicals like John Stott continued the tradition of preaching and practising celibacy and there has been little attempt it seems to explore or express how marriage might actually nourish a vocation to ordained ministry.

The Counter-reformation culture stressed the inherent elements of separation – both responding to and helping to promote a world view of those who dominate, control and dispense spirituality and those who receive it.

It was the so-called French school who had most influence on post-reformation notions of priesthood. Here priests bear the character of the Son of God imprinted upon their souls through baptism and the grace of orders. Separation came about through their cultic function but also because the priest increasingly became a person set apart as a result of possessing a unique and superior holiness.

The background perception was that both the body and intimacy were subject to decay and so are unreliable, whereas what is sacred has come to be assumed as to be eternal and imperishable – and so in an odd way perhaps to be kept at a distance to preserve its purity. So liturgically over time sanctuary screens introduced, offertory processions were dropped, the exchange of the peace limited to the clergy – all to protect the sacred but in protecting so of course also separating and limiting. Now other forces were of course at work here but it would seem that the absence of the erotic played its part as one element in a bigger picture.

In conclusion our spiritual journey perhaps needs to come to involve seeking and finding God in all risky, vulnerable, changing human experience and relationships, especially any sexualised ones. And our handling of the Spiritual Exercises as directors should respond to the challenge of integration that this history presents us with.

**Quotation:**

For giving me desire,
An eager thirst, a burning ardent fire,
A virgin infant flame,
A love with which into the World I came,
An inward hidden heavenly love,
Which in my soul did work and move,
And ever ever me inflame,
With restless longing heavenly avarice
That never could be satisfied,

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3 Mark Jordan, the Ethics of Sex
That did incessantly a Paradise
Unknown suggest, and something undescribed
Discern, and bear me to it; be
Thy name for ever prais’d by me

Thomas Traherne ‘Desire’

Questions for reflection:

- What are the main desires that have formed and shaped you?
- How have your desires brought you into greater intimacy with others, the world and God?

WAYS FORWARD WITH THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES?

We have inherited from the past (crystallised above all in the enlightenment and Descartes’ statement ‘Cogito ergo sum’) a concept of Self that sees its bedrock as a pure state of mind – something rational, interior and desexualised.

The further exploring of the Self – not only what has been but what might be our experience – seems to me at the heart of the Exercises – achieved primarily in a threefold way:

i) The journey of prayer and personal experience – as we reflect on our own life and actions, so we engage with the unfolding & developing encounter with the risen Lord.

ii) The modelling of the director – so freedom here is required too, hand in hand with the directee, or perhaps a step ahead, or sometimes one behind! Here the director can be invited into deeper prayer - being invited to go against one’s assumptions, conditioning or the limitations of personal experience.

iii) The deepening experience of God, objective as well as subjective. For surely a more grounded spirituality will go hand in hand with a fuller and more mature theology about a God involved with and informing all human reality.

Thus re-uniting in life and in faith eros (that is to say the narrowly sexual) with agape (something that has become on its own detached and narrowly religious). For we can see from our culture that sex without the sacred produces lives without connection – and ultimately a crisis of meaning and purpose. Whilst the sacred without sex becomes ungrounded in messy reality and produces an intellectual God to whom we can only offer obedience and so a religion reduced to moral values and dutiful ritual – and ultimately a crisis of duality.
Our call then is to re-sacralising the erotic, and eroticising the sacred – releasing transforming passion back into our faith, selflessness back into our relationships and the real possibility of taking our place as co-creators with God.

Margaret Guenther in her book *Holy Listening* uses three images for the task or role of the director and I want to use these through which to address what I want to say more specifically about the director, sexuality and the Exercises. Using each (welcomer, teacher, midwife) – perhaps slightly artificially – as relating to different Weeks or phases. Though as with the Exercises of course the qualities run up and down as necessary throughout the whole process and journey.

1. **Principle & Foundation - as welcomer** – in the context of providing hospitality.

Margaret cites Genesis 18.2-8 and the following attributes:

- providing and sharing space
- offering silence & safety
- listening to the story
- identifying needs
- self disclosing/making vulnerable
- helping deal with the rubbish
- passing on/bringing to a close

So what might this mean to us with the perspective of Sexuality and the Exercises?

All too often Spiritual Direction is a matter of two disembodied heads talking – how often in your experience of ongoing direction (as speaker or listener) are matters of body and sexuality discussed – a lot? Or a little?

The question though is how much of the person sitting opposite you are you willing to offer hospitality to? It may be that with many of us you are tired of the disproportionate amount of attention the church seems to give the topic. But to be identified with this frustration may communicate a message of exclusion to your directee.

As Robert Marsh comments in his Way article last autumn on this subject, the slightest hint given that you are receptive to hearing this sort of material openly will be greeted with relief. On the other hand, even the slightest shift in body language can shut the line of communication down again.

Sexuality like every other aspect of human life needs to be related to the centre and goal of life, the reign of God. If left at the door of the retreat house or direction room it will remain unconverted. If delayed or left to the 1st Week the old message of the identification of sex and sin, the body and the fallen world is likely to be reinforced. It too therefore deserves a place in the affirming world view of the P&F. The NRSV version of the Bible notes that in the Song of Solomon ‘sexuality is treated with restraint and affirmed without coyness or apology….the resulting love is seen as a communion of souls.’ So desire itself may have, indeed perhaps always has, a spiritual message.
Would then that the Song of Songs might be our model. Would that we acknowledge all the myriad ways that sexuality is present in many if not all areas of life. Would that we could fully rejoice in the renewed sense of sexuality’s spiritual power.

R. Marsh also points out that the Hebrew word ‘yada’ covers both knowing and sex because both invite relationship and both demand transformation. Given all this how can we afford not overtly to include sexuality in the whole journey of the Exercises?

2. **1**\(^{st}\) Week *- as teacher* – Mark 10.17-22 cited as are also the following:

- encouraging play
- identifying limits
- always hopeful
- educating for maturity – providing information
- asking questions
- offering challenge
- being vulnerable
- evaluating progress
- a learner too

So again what might this mean to us here?

In a commentary on the Qur’an, Abdullah YusufAli wrote ‘sex, which governs so much of our physical life, and has so much influence on our emotional and our higher nature, deserves – not our fear or our contempt or our amused indulgence but our reverence in the highest sense of the term’ (Beltsville 1999). This reverence is critical I would suggest as the power and danger of the erotic comes apparent in the 1st Week.

a. **for the director** – being vulnerable and a learner

Mary Rose Bumpus and her colleague in their book on Supervision offer a comprehensive Appendix on sexuality and the director with a list of questions, some of which I list, slightly paraphrased:

- Which of your current directees do you find most attractive and why?
- Is there anyone – or specific group – you would not be open to serving as a spiritual director?
- How might you deal with that if the issue only emerged after beginning the 30 day journey together?
- When was the last time you were enmeshed in transference or counter transference with a directee? What helped you retrieve the situation?
- What makes you happy and/or unhappy about being a woman or a man?
- Where and in what situations do you experience the most pleasure with your body?
- When have you experienced yourself as being most desirable to God?
- What part does passion play in your relationship with God?
b. **for both director and directee** – the need for discernment particularly because of:
- the dangers of eros once separated from agape as already noted
- the dangers as always of wants become separated from deeper needs
- the dangers and opportunities of the shadow
- dangers of the possibilities of addiction or habit

all where the holy longing that draws us into intimacy gets distracted into more immediate gratification or wrong ends.

c. **for the directee**:

Needing at times, support, challenge, information, fresh perspectives to broaden horizons and bring greater freedom before the possibilities of God.

3. **2nd Week - as midwife.** John 3.2-4 cited as also the following:
- be willing to wait
- offering presence and support
- deal with uncertainty
- focussed activity at times of labour
- celebration

So what again might this mean to us?

In 1964 a church report entitled ‘Towards a Quaker View of Sex’ commented that ‘we need a release of love, warmth and generosity into the world, in the everyday contacts of life, a positive force that will weaken our fear of one another and our tendencies toward aggression and power-seeking. We need to recognise fearlessly and thankfully the sexual origin of this force.’ (London. Friends Home Service)

As we explore the role of the Trinity and the person of Jesus the erotic force for connection and creativity empowering the divine love is hard to resist and at its heart surely lies the journey of intimacy. John Futrell talks of God being so carried away with love for the world that the Incarnation becomes inevitable and surely it is the risks of love and the exploring of the personal fears that we carry within that we explore in the early part of this 2nd Week, particularly in the key meditations.

**CONCLUSION**

W.Meissner has in his magisterial ‘Ignatius Loyola. Psychology of a Saint’ has discussed fairly extensively Ignatius’s sexual identity. The effect on him of the early death of his mother, the machismo culture of his day, his early promiscuity and later libidinal struggles.

But Meissner also attests to Ignatius’ largely successful repression on the one hand and sublimation on the other of his sexuality. Perception has changed now with
regard to what is desirable and appropriate with regard to both repression and sublimation but the point remains. Raw sexuality may need to be mined during our journey inwards, permission may need to be granted for its presence to be identified and its ramifications explored, but at some point that raw matter needs to be transmuted, boundaried, transformed as part of the bigger picture of the crafting of an apostle, of discovering the Christ within oneself and of oneself in Christ. The full spectrum from repression through sublimation to expression is available as we engage with the journey of transmutation, transformation and choice.

While the genital arena of life was one Ignatius eschewed in his maturity the erotic dimension continued to fuel his prayer, his ministry and his apostleship. It lead to that communion of souls that the NRSV adverted to that I mentioned earlier.

It has been said that Christianity does not understand sexual passion in the same way that the world does not understand chastity. The Exercises are one of the ways that understanding can come, and through understanding growth and maturity as children of God.

For once sexual passion and chastity are reunited, once eros and agape rejoined in a focussed and appropriate experience of human and divine desire so ecstasy comes and so union comes. The movement from election through 3rd and 4th weeks to the vision of the contemplation surely mirrors this journey.

Quotation:

God has given us a dark wine so potent that, drinking it, we leave the two worlds.

God has put into the form of hashish a power to deliver the taster from self-consciousness.

God has made sleep so that it erases every thought.

God has made Majnun love Layla so much that just her dog would cause confusion in him.

There are thousands of wines that can take over our minds.

Don’t think all ecstasies are the same!

Jesus was lost in his love for God. His donkey was drunk with barley.

Drink from the presence of saints, not from those other jars.

Every object, every being,
is a jar full of delight.

Be a connoisseur,
and taste with caution.

Any wine will get you high.
Judge like a king, and choose the purest,

The ones unadulterated with fear,
or some urgency about “what’s needed.”

Drink the wine that moves you
as a camel moves when its been untied,
and is just ambling about.

Rumi, ‘The Many Wines’

Questions:

- Have your desires, or any fears that they may have triggered, led to any diminishment of life?

- What invitation might there be around all this for action or prayer?

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Can sex be a spiritual act that boosts spirituality? Those moments of intimacy and sexuality with your spouse, those special moments when no matter how much noise might be outside of the window, you are only aware of each other. That deep connection which is connected to your trust, vulnerability, emotions and your faith. Sex, when done in an ethical and halal manner, can not only be connected to your spirituality, it can also be a spiritual boost. For far too long, people have associated religion and spirituality with caged sexuality and something shameful. Questions on Sex and Intimacy Problems Got Answered. As if religious followers are not Spiritual Sexuality. Examples of Spiritual Masters & New Age Leaders Indecent Sexual Contradictions. March 25, 2012. Latest, Most Recent Articles . . .

The greatest obstacle to our spiritual growth is ourselves. Although our spirits would soar, facets of our minds prevent such self-transcendence. For reasons also built into our being, we cannot be fully open-minded, we limit our wonder and awe, we fear to strike out on new adventures, we selfishly attend only to ourselves. The Spiritual Exercises is a manual of spiritual arms containing a "intense prayer, he composed the Spiritual Exercises, a guidebook to convert the heart and mind to a closer following of Jesus Christ. On August 15, 1534, at Paris, six young men who had met him at the University of Paris and made a retreat according to the Spiritual Exercises joined . . . Read More. Jesuit. Tonight's lecture will deal with the spiritual meaning of sexuality. In one of the early lectures, I discussed three aspects of the one great universal, creative energy: the erotic, the sexual, and the love force. All three are really aspects of the same force. They only appear as distinctly different within the narrow realm of the ego. I will use the term "sexuality" to represent the total creative force and will discuss its purpose and its spiritual meaning as manifested in the human realm. How sexuality manifests varies according to the development of each human being. We shall discuss the