

'The snake and the chalice'

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This paper is based on a talk delivered at a meeting on the subject of sanity, sex and the sacred. It is written from the point of view of a general psychiatrist and draws from the clinical setting, and the ordinary life experience of femininity, motherhood and an interest in literature and spirituality.

As I approached the virgin page, I was aware of the act; was it to be one of defilement or creation, a sterile piece of mental masturbation or productive intercourse with minds other than my own? That which is inanimate can be invested with sexuality and that which is transcendent can be conceived of using this fundamental human imagery.

Where I come from and did my undergraduate training, sexuality and spirituality were often thought of as antithetical. From my limited knowledge of other cultures, I suspect that this may be less of a problem in Eastern cultures than in the West. The early Christian Fathers and the Greeks before them created a split between spirit and matter, and a denigration of the sexual realm, which in turn involved a denigration of the feminine.

Psychiatry has had an ambivalent relationship with sex and the Spirit. In the history of psychiatry masturbation has been pathologised and abnormal states of mind characterised as 'hysteria' (the wandering of the womb). These conditions could be treated with mutilatory surgical interventions.¹ In the post-enlightenment era the spiritual realm also became pathologised as irrational.

Freud was something of a restorative crusader for the sexual realm with his provocative theories that all of human life was underpinned by libidinal drives, which could be thwarted in various ways. He thought of religion as one of these ways. More creatively, he characterised it as an illusion. Jung, by contrast was deeply interested in religion, and its symbolic relationship to the masculine and feminine archetypes of the unconscious and the unity of opposites.

In this paper I have chosen to think about the vast topic of sex and the Spirit in terms of destructive and creative interactions in the hope of generating a productive synthesis that could be beneficial in our work.

In Ireland, where I did my undergraduate training during the 1970s, religious influences were often pernicious, invading the consciousness of ordinary people in damaging ways. Religious authorities attempted to exert control over sexuality, not only as an act, but even as a thought. The following story comes from a case conference that I was told about, but didn't actually attend. However its powerful imagery, its funny and its terrible aspects have stayed with me ever since my student days.

A middle aged man was presented at a case conference. He had suffered for some time before his admission from intrusive thoughts of an obsessional nature. These took the form of a fantasy that the devil would take over his genitalia in the form of a snake. The idea made him very anxious. The fantasy then became more elaborate and threatening. Not only would this happen, but it would happen at the mass. Worse still, it would happen at the

holiest part of the mass - the consecration. Being a devout Catholic he could not avoid going to mass, but the experience became very anxiety-provoking. His admission took place when the whole thing became intolerable for him and, in layman's terms; he suffered a sort of psychological collapse.

He had gone to mass, and the fantasy had become more elaborate. Here I am not sure of whether it became delusional, but, at any rate his ego could no longer stand the threat of his fantasy which reached a climactic conclusion whereby the devil invaded his genitalia in the form of a snake at the mass, and his genitalia then took flight and landed in the chalice at the point of consecration.

The response of colleagues to this story is generally to see the funny side. Outside the clinical setting of actually working with this patient, it is maybe difficult to empathise with the pain and distress of this obsessional symptom which this man felt put his body and soul in jeopardy.

The story is a fragment without sufficient information about context. I think that in some way it could be interpreted as representing an unhealthy split between the man's instinctual and his conscious life. This split operated on a cultural as well as an individual level. The fantasy could be viewed in an alternative way as an invitation to become a more integrated or whole person. I suspect that the treatment he got may have been aimed at helping him to put this dreadful thought back in its box, and get on with suboptimal living.

The imagery makes me think of Kundalini Yoga, and how in that frame of reference it might be seen to represent the life force, in the form of a serpent, ascending the Chakras from the base of the spine to the crown of the head and resulting in a spiritual growth. (Incidentally the first time I heard of Kundalini was from a psychotic patient conceptualising his experience in this way. I was fortunate to have had a student with me, who told me this was not, per se, delusional).

In psychiatric practice here in the UK, I have much less commonly come across the overt juxtaposition of spiritual and sexual concerns. However, I have however seen several young people whose sexual orientation is clear to the observer as homosexual, but who, because of religious upbringing are deeply conflicted about their sexuality such that they cannot accept themselves as such. There is a desperate concern to be 'straight' rather than to accept a gay identity. Self acceptance is feared as it could lead to rejection by parents and by an internalised rejecting parent. For fundamentalist Christians there is also the fear of eternal damnation in embracing a way of life that is 'an abomination'. This conflict can result in a marriage doomed to failure, and/or to dangerous acting out of the conflict, causing further suffering to self and others. In one instance this took the form of a suicide attempt. Surviving this attempt was briefly associated with assurance of the love of God. This was quickly followed by self repudiation for the sin of putting God to the test!

There are many literary examples of the mental anguish suffered by individuals on account of traditional religiously based attitudes to sexuality. Oscar Wilde wrote from the depths of his suffering in Reading Gaol, revealing a profound spiritual dimension in somebody generally known at the time as a fashionable satirist. James Joyce as a child listened to long and intense sermons by priests describing in the greatest detail the impact of hell on the senses. Several pages of 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man' are taken up

with one such sermon.² The adolescent Joyce transiently believed he was doomed to hell on account of ordinary sexual awakenings. Wilde and Joyce both emerged from this torment as great literary figures. Their suffering is not thereby justified, but it is interesting how they transformed it in their art.

Another purely fictional example of perverse, traditional, religious attitudes to sex comes from Joseph O'Connor's novel of the Irish famine, 'Star of the Sea'.³ I quote this because it is an example of priestly attitudes to female sexual emergence. The young heroine is missing her illicit lover who has been sent away to boarding school. She confesses some of her dreams to a young well respected priest.

'He said such imaginings were the worst kind of evil, a poisonous affront to the Virgin Mary'. 'That sin causes Our Lady to weep,' he had insisted. 'Every time it is committed Our Mother's heart is pierced with a burning sword. For a young woman to defile her own God-given body is a tremendous victory for Satan'

There was another important matter...Young men couldn't control themselves. They had feelings which young women didn't have. A woman was a glacier, melting slowly, but a man was a volcano of boiling passions. Every man on earth had to carry that cross; even Pope Pius himself...That was how Almighty God had designed it, but the devil could step in...if invited...The asylums of every city in England were howling with men who had been ruined by women. Better a millstone were tied around a girl's neck and she be flung [into the sea] ... than to coax a young man to lustful temptation which he lacked the mental apparatus to resist. As for his physical apparatus, the less said the better. When Satan stood up it was time to run.'

As with the other literary examples, the health in O'Connor's heroine saves the day, and she is joyfully aware of having found the priest's words arousing, and carries on with her life unharmed by his appalling indictment of her sexuality. Ordinary people, who may become our patients, do not always transcend or transform their experiences in this way. Our own attitudes too can be adversely influenced by problematic religious attitudes to sexuality.

A particularly awful manifestation of the interaction between distorted spirituality and mental illness is the actual physical removal of the genitalia by men suffering from schizophrenia or depressive psychosis. In my career I have known of three such people. My impression is that these tragedies in some way vindicate the Freudian view of the vital importance of sexuality, as the act may be followed by both short and long-term risk of suicide. I am reminded of the word 'manhood' sometimes used to describe the penis. In a way, self-castration seems to be a symbolic suicide, and sometimes prodromal to the completed act. Religious pre-occupation is common in these cases, and in one such case the patient recounts a childhood experience of sexual abuse by a priest.

The scandal of sexual abuse by clergy who are often officially celibate, is generally well known now, and the authorities are trying very hard to address it. Interestingly, the likely connection between dangerous sexual acts and forbidden sexual outlet is often resisted by the religious authorities. One hopes that with general awareness of the problem, we will eventually see fewer people affected. For myself, I have had the interesting but harrowing experience of providing reports for an Irish solicitor on the effects on adults of their childhoods in the now-notorious Irish convent orphanages. These people

were not always explicitly sexually abused, (sometimes physical abuse was sexualised) but their lives were very damaged by what was probably an insightful contempt for the instinctual life of young people and for the inescapable fact that all children are products of the sexual act.

It was a striking tribute to the survival of the human spirit that the people I saw had made the best of ordinary life, held jobs and raised families against terrible odds. Spiritually, their experience left them with a fear and distrust of religion. One man only went to church reluctantly for weddings and resolved that none of his descendants would be taught by priests or nuns. Another went to mass but would not receive communion because God had permitted such things as had happened to him. He was concerned that his dead body should not rest in a church. Another female patient, brought up by nuns as 'the product of sin' entered an abusive marriage followed by an unhappy lesbian relationship. I met her as a single mother trying to do the best by her son and finding secular spiritual experience from listening to classical music, which she found profoundly moving. A psychotherapy student on a placement with our team recently remarked to me that the real 'satanic abuse' consists of psychological abuse with a religious mandate.

Related to this topic are other considerations which make the issue less black and white, but may therefore help us to understand religious sexual and psychosexual abuse. Two questions come to mind. Is there something about religion that can incline people either towards sexual abuse or even to self castration in psychosis? Should there be a warning, 'religion can seriously damage your health'?

From my point of view, religion and spiritual ideas become destructive when they are taken too literally. An extreme example of this is where male auto-castration is associated with a preoccupation with the following passage from the bible which involves removal of the offending part. ⁴

'For there are some eunuchs, which were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake'. Matthew 19:12

The Jungian writer Edward Edinger, writing of the Christian tradition, sees much of the teaching of Christ in the gospels as relating to the process of individuation. The suggestion, for example, of loving your enemies is understood as taking an accepting attitude or loving attitude to the weaker or 'shadow' aspects of the self in order to be more integrated or whole. He notes the difference between the general life affirming tenor of the teaching and the passages advocating cutting off appendages. He believes that these may address an earlier stage of personal development where the ego is identified with the 'Self' and needs to separate out before the later integrative stage. ⁵ Cutting off, may also be conceived in terms of communities and difference and literally interpreted could be an imperative to projection and splitting. I think here about sectarianism in religious traditions and homophobia within many of them.

Religious literalism can slip into our inner lives more subtly and affect our spiritual experience, determining whether or not we healthily metabolise the material we may have been fed in our particular religious traditions. Here I will give examples of two poems: one of my own, and another by the poet and performer Chris Tutton.

WITNESS

A taxi-driver tries to save my soul
While driving home –
After my third miscarriage.
Soft tones of his native Belfast
Whispering salvation
Connect me to my past.

“And don’t you know”
Says he
“That Jesus did for you
And me,
And don’t you see
That He
Can take away your pain?”

Oh please – refrain!
Oh don’t *you* see –
I’m not a Buddhist, Muslim, Jew –
Though these have their religion too,
I’m a lapsed Christian just like you –
Have been and may become.

You talk of redemption,
I can feel my loss
In this my female body and my blood,
And not
In contemplation of the cross.
I need to feel this now.

I will not take Blood of the Lamb
Served to me in a traffic jam.
I want to be
Just as I am
Not rushing to Damascus.

I do not want to be force-fed
With Jesus, true and living bread.
Sometimes I feel as though I’m dead.
So let me be!

Oh let me be!
Please let me be!
I’ll wait for the God who waits for me.
Just wait and see! ⁶

SHOCK OF THE NEW

After I was baptised
I was told that
Jesus had entered me.
I felt distressed
Confused and
Hell bent on vengeance. ⁷

My own poem was written at a difficult time, and from a particularly feminine experience. The received religious icon of a somewhat castrated male God-image was unhelpful. For Chris Tutton, as a determinedly heterosexual male, the sexual aspect of religious language is positively threatening. The camp comedian and TV presenter Graham Norton has a different experience again, in relation to the Protestant icon that is Holman Hunt's picture "Light of the World". Norton was shown this picture at an evangelical after-school club and told that Jesus was knocking at the door of his heart, waiting to be invited in.



The Light of the World: William Holman Hunt 1854

'The picture grabbed hold of my imagination, because after a couple of months I decided that the idea of Jesus living inside me sounded great. I was not accustomed to having any sort of lodger in my body, never mind the actual Son of God. As it happened Jesus turned out to be a very quiet flatmate. I

think it would be safe to say that I never even knew he was there. I assume he moved out at some point, but his departure was as uneventful as his moving in'.⁸

In the Eastern traditions, as with yin and yang, and the female Hindu manifestations of the godhead, there are degrees of balance and representations of the masculine and feminine in spiritual symbols. In the Western tradition there is a feminine aspect of the godhead associated with wisdom, but this is not generally known (although it is enshrined in the College motto 'Let Wisdom Guide'. In Christianity there is the Virgin Mary, an icon that is both chaste and maternal, whose sexuality is denied in a manner that epitomises the split between flesh and spirit; an impossible model of womanhood that reinforces socially exploitative norms of the obedience and passivity of women. Mary provides the necessary body through which her son became the incarnation of the Divine. Where incarnation unites the split between spirit and flesh, religious tradition down the centuries has countered this by creating an icon divested of carnality.

Caravaggio shocked his religious patrons by depicting the dead Madonna as a real woman using as his model the corpse of a local prostitute.⁹

Jung rejoiced in the elevation of the feminine archetype represented by the official recognition in 1950 by the Pope of the popular doctrine of the assumption into heaven of the mother of Jesus.¹⁰ This remained a scanty concession however, as just as tradition has Mary conceiving and even giving birth without losing virginity, so her death is a *dormition* or 'falling asleep' involving none of the corruption that afflicts the real flesh in nature.

Female patients sometimes believe they are the Virgin Mary, pregnant by the Holy Spirit. I can think of two such women, both very damaged in their ordinary lives: one by severe physical disability, and the other by schizophrenia. Both of them perhaps provide a parody of perfection. One went on a psychotic journey around London in winter while suffering from incontinence. The other assumed a pregnant stance such that successive new junior doctors ordered scans, so convincing was the pseudocyesis. For both of these very ill women the delusion could be seen to represent a desperate wish for a miraculous reversal of fate; the hope perhaps of giving birth to a divine saviour.

Aside from her castration, The Virgin Mary has her uses, as the strength of her cult of devotion has demonstrated down the years. There is something of an Eastern wisdom in the saying 'Let it be'. This is an attitude receptive to spiritual development, and sometimes the only response to all sorts of challenges, one which allows change to happen. I am reminded of the saying 'let go and let God!' The Virgin Mary as Mater Dolorosa can be an inspiration to all who are faced with suffering in others which they cannot prevent and in which 'being there', however impotent it may feel, is a vital and sometimes a transforming function. As I write this I am aware of this function in psychotherapy.

I would like to move now from the consideration of whether religion can be bad for your health to the rather different consideration of the possibility that spirituality could be exciting or have an exciting potential. I would like to start by considering what I might call 'the secret life of religion', that is to say, the erotic charge of religious language and imagery.

As a rather culture-bound child in a religious country, I remember a particular pursuit with my best friend, of comparing notes on the most erotic or sexual passages in the bible from the Song of Songs to some of the laws of Leviticus. In particular we would study the Church of Ireland (Anglican) Hymnal for rich pickings with much giggles and excitement. Some of these stand out in my mind as follows:

“Come, O thou traveller unknown,
Whom still I hold but cannot see;

With thee all night I mean to stay,
And wrestle till the break of day.”

“Jesu, lover of my soul,
Let me to thy bosom fly” ¹¹

There are many words that spring to mind that connect spirituality and eroticism. Here are just a few: love, ecstasy, womb, passion, bosom, rapture, surrender, bondage, desire, agony adoration...

So what is this all about? I think it is about the power or perhaps the fertility of imagery. It also points to the possibility that human love in all its carnality is possibly a metaphor for relating to ‘the other Other’: that is, to the Divine. The metaphysical poets, some of them priests, knew this, as did the Islamic poet Rumi, who conceived of the Divine as the Beloved. Here are two metaphysical poems in which sexual and religious imagery can be seen.

LOVE

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guiltie of dust and sinne.
But quick-ey’d Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lack’d any thing.

A guest, I answer’d, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marr’d them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame:
My deare, then I will serve.
You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat;
So I did sit and eat.

George Herbert ¹²

BATTER MY HEART

Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you
As yet but knock; breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captiv'd, and proves weak or untrue.
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But am bethroth'd unto your enemy;
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

John Donne ¹³

There is a love affair going on here between the soul (generally feminine) and the Divine. The lover may be unknown and mysterious, as in Wesley's traveller and reveals himself as in Herbert's poem 'Love' in an invitation to intimacy, consummation or communion. Sometimes the lover was gentle, other times 'he' might be rough.

We have been looking at how sexual imagery enriches spiritual language and experience and how there is a tangible overlap between spiritual and sexual experience in terms of the excitement of passions. A most beautiful example of this is Bernini's statue of the ecstasy of St Theresa, which conveys in cold marble, in a profoundly physical way, the absolute fulfilment of desire.



ECSTASY OF ST. TERESA Gianlorenzo Bernini 1647-52

Can spiritual imagery and practice also enhance the experience of sexuality? It seems likely that there can be a reciprocal and possibly a synergistic relationship. In the Western tradition such ideas were often deemed heretical, such that sex was about procreation rather than pleasure. Attitudes to sexuality in the West have changed over time. The pleasurable aspects of intimacy in marriage are valued in the rediscovery of the Kabala, and down the centuries the Christian Church has also moved from the position that 'it is better to marry than to burn' to the sacrament of marriage in which the partners make vows that imply a healthy respect for sexual pleasure: 'With my body I thee worship'. The proper context for sexual intimacy remains controversial in religious traditions, and this is to a large extent a societal and community issue as much as a personal one. In my view it is difficult in our post-modern age for young people to belong to traditions which condemn extramarital and same sex relations.

Eastern religions do not display the same inhibition about sexuality. Religious art can be explicitly sexual and sexual pleasure can be pursued in a context that is devotional in a spiritual as well as a personal sense. The karma sutra is a spiritual work, which has the sanctified aim of enhancing sexual intimacy. The Tantric tradition of Hinduism/Buddhism values spiritual meditation in the context of sexual acts. One can speculate about how the Irishman's fantasy with which I started may be seen through Eastern glasses in a more positive and transcendent light.

On a psychological level spiritual development can be seen in terms of the ego's increasing awareness of its relation to and dependence on the archetypal 'Self' or Ground of Being. Edinger, in the Jungian tradition links it in this way with a process of individuation. This is likely, in turn to mitigate against the use of the other in a narcissistic way as providing for one's own lack or need, and allow the capacity for real relationship with a real other. This authentic relating to the other is conceived of as a spiritual aim by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber.¹⁴

In conclusion, sexuality and religion, or spirit and flesh can be seen as opposites which can war with each to their mutual detriment. There is, perhaps, an inevitable tension between them. Such tensions of creativity and destructiveness are vital to healthy life, and need to be held together and contained within our spiritual and psychological frames of reference, as one without the other is sterile, and the fullness of life may comprise both and more.

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