

‘Sexuality and Spirituality – Possible Conjunctions’

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Setting the scene

I began by inviting the meeting to free-associate to the word Spirituality and we listed the following responses:

Love, Compassion, God, Oneness, Creative impulse, Breast, Mystery, Sense, Beauty, Supernatural, Holiness, Awareness, Wholeness, Person, and Light.

I next asked whether we would definitely not want to use any of these words about sexuality. Questions were raised about Supernatural, Holiness, and Light.

I then asked for associations to the word Sexuality. The responses were:

Love, Merger, Intimacy, Passion, Ecstasy, Physicality, Sensuality, Dark, Transport, Orgasm, Climax, Danger, Guilt, Betrayal, Bodily Fluids, Suffering, Sharing, Neurosis, Shame, Responsibility, Self knowledge, Children, and Sacred.

Of these, the meeting felt that only Physicality and Betrayal would be difficult to apply to spirituality (bodily fluids were also mentioned, but this was countered by the importance of blood in several religious traditions).

These responses suggest that there is considerable overlap between the realms of sexuality and spirituality! David Carr, a Biblical scholar, writes:

‘I work ... on the premise – that sexuality and spirituality are intricately interwoven, that when one is impoverished, the other is warped, and that there is some kind of crucially important connection between the journey toward God and the journey toward coming to terms with our own sexual embodiment. Both sexuality and spirituality require space in one’s life to grow. Neither flourishes amidst constant busyness and exhaustion. Both require an openness to being deeply affected by someone outside oneself, whether one’s lover or God. Both involve the whole self. Finally, at their most intense, both spirituality and sexuality involve an interplay between closeness and distance. Neither sexuality nor spirituality work if one is seeking a constant ‘high.’ Just as it is a mistake to expect everyone to feel a constant mystical connection to God, so also many people harm themselves and others through seeking consistently superlative sexual ecstasy. (Carr 2003, p10)

I respond very warmly to these words. There is something about the longing for passionate connectedness which is fundamental to human well-being – however much, these days, sex has been removed from the sacred arena. But

how can we hold together the physiological and the spiritual poles of our existence? Is there a theoretical model which will enable us meaningfully to relate the physiological, the psychological, and the spiritual dimensions, without collapsing psychology into physiology, or spirituality into psychology?

The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm

This conundrum of holding different levels of interpretation together exercises the psychologists of religion. One recent approach, advocated by Paloutzian and Park in their *Handbook of the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (Paloutzian and Park: 2005), is what they call *The Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm*. This provides 'an overarching umbrella within which research studies in various areas and sub-areas (can) proceed and be related to each other' (Paloutzian and Park 2005, p5).

The paradigm 'recognises the value of data at multiple levels of analysis while making non-reductive assumptions concerning the value of spiritual and religious phenomena' (Emmons and Paloutzian, quoted in Paloutzian and Park 2005, p6).

It may be easier to understand what they mean if we take a practical example. Imagine an act of sexual intercourse between two people. We can study, or interpret, what is going on from a variety of levels, or standpoints:

7. A spiritual 'discipline' consciously undertaken.
6. A spiritual experience, discovered in the process.
5. An expression of loving commitment and communion.
4. A 'good fuck' between consenting but emotionally uninvolved adults.
3. An enactment in which the reality of the other person is irrelevant, e.g. rape, revenge, or oedipal triumph
2. The physiology of male/female sexual arousal.
1. The 'selfish gene'.

All levels are not going to be simultaneously in play, and we could insert other possible levels of interpretation, or angles of study, which would contribute their own perspective. Any act of sexual intercourse will be multiply determined. The value of The Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm, though, is that it allows different levels of interpretation to co-exist, without collapsing one level into another. This is important when we are trying to include the spiritual dimension, which is frequently occluded in psychiatric and psychotherapeutic thinking.

Sexuality and spirituality – possible conjunctions

The importance of the multi-level approach becomes apparent if we review some of the many ways in which men and women have brought their sexuality and their spirituality into conjunction.

In the Taoist tradition, in China, there is a huge literature about sexual practices designed to bring the Yin and the Yang (the feminine and the masculine) into harmony. From a western scientific point of view, of course, we may have questions about the physiological notions implicit in the Taoist understanding of semen, and its movements within the body. But, just looked at in an impressionistic way, and from a more emotional level, we might think that the Taoists know a great deal about bringing the male and female cycles of sexual response into a profoundly enriching harmony.

Moving south and west from China, into India and Tibet, we find a vast amount of material from the Tantric tradition, which finds expression both in Hinduism and in Buddhism. Here the emphasis is not on bringing Yin and Yang into harmony, but on using the sexual energy and excitement generated in the pelvic region to raise psychic energy up through the Chakras to the very crown of the head, where one enters into union with the cosmic orgasm which is eternally generated (as Hinduism suggests) by the sexual play of Shakti and Shiva. Within Tantrism there are the right-hand and the left-hand paths. The right-hand path seeks to achieve this elevation of psychic energy through meditation and spiritual discipline, rather than actual sexual practice; the left-hand path requires sexual expression and – very often – rather terrifying and unpleasant rituals, for Shakti is also Kali, the destroyer and hideous agent of time.

Moving further west, into the Middle East, we enter one of the great cradles of fertility religion which frequently involved sacred prostitution. At first, it may have been a King and a High Priestess who consummated the cosmic union of heaven and earth. Later, ordinary people would enact the sacred marriage, as they sought to ensure the fertility of their cattle or their crops. In Sumeria, for example, (modern day Iraq), according to the Greek historian Herodotus who wrote in the 5th century BCE, every woman once in her lifetime used to play the part of a sacred prostitute in the temple of Ishtar, offering her fee on the altar of the Goddess.

Indirectly, these fertility cults played a significant role in the development of ancient Judaism and, through Judaism, on Christianity and Islam. The Hebrew Scriptures reveal a protracted struggle, lasting for several hundred years, between the attractions of the fertility cults and the monotheistic impulse, which tended to cloak itself in rather patriarchal form; albeit with Yahweh as the husband of his people Israel. Significantly, though, Judaism retained a gloriously erotic streak through the inclusion of the *Songs of Songs* within its canon of sacred scripture - (the *Song*, which was read as depicting the relationship between God and Israel in profoundly erotic terms was also destined to play a formative role within the Christian mystical tradition).

As far as sexuality is concerned, Christianity was born of a slightly unfortunate marriage. On the positive side, it inherited from Judaism the erotic

sense of the relationship between God and his people – or, Christ and the church – albeit it with a patriarchal spin; but it also imbibed a great deal of Greek thinking, which bred a suspicion of matter and bodily processes, and valued chastity over sexual expression. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all advocate marriage, and each has a mystical tradition which employs erotic symbolism; but it can be argued that they all suffer from a patriarchal bias and, historically, have viewed homosexuality – especially between men – with varying degrees of hostility and, often, downright persecution. As if this wasn't enough, the catalogue of sexual abuse claims being launched against Christian clergy, particularly in the Roman Catholic Church, is tragic evidence of a dogmatic and doctrinaire attitude to sexuality, and demonstrates the huge dangers and pitfalls in this area. That said, though, Christianity remains a religion committed to the primacy of love, so is never able to escape from the questions posed by sex and spirit.

In this rapid survey I should also include the adherents of Wicca, although their numbers are probably quite small. In my experience, they tend to see the monotheisms as brutal, patriarchal impositions, and prefer to follow the Craft, which claims to be the ancient religion of this country, honouring nature and the Great Mother. One strand of Wicca, influenced by Aleister Crowley and Gerald Gardner, involves naked rites and ritual sex; although it is difficult to establish how widely Gardner's brand of witchcraft is still practised.

Beyond Wicca – and always to be distinguished from it – are forms of Satanism, which are generally driven by the desire to subvert Christianity and so are, paradoxically, conditioned by Christian thinking, though in inverted form. If there is such a thing as satanic abuse – which Jean La Fontaine (La Fontaine 1998), for one, disputes – it is probably to be looked for in this area.

This rapid survey is enough to show that the notion of connecting spirituality and sexuality is not some newfangled idea but, rather, something almost universal in scope, and deeply embedded – albeit in very different forms – within many of the great religious traditions. But if this is true, what are the implications for mental health?

Our need to adore

Consider this quotation from a modern Christian mystic, the geologist and palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin (translated here from the French, so it reads in a slightly artificial way). Teilhard is speaking to Jesus:

'Sometimes people think that they can increase Your attraction in my eyes by stressing almost exclusively the charm and goodness of Your human life in the past. But... why should we turn to Judea two thousand years ago? No, what I cry out for, like every being, with my whole life and all my earthly passion, is something very different from an equal to cherish: it is a God to adore.

To adore ... that means to lose oneself in the unfathomable, to plunge into the inexhaustible, to find peace in the incorruptible, to be absorbed in defined

immensity, to offer oneself to the fire and the transparency, to annihilate oneself in proportion as one becomes more deliberately conscious of oneself, and to give of one's deepest to that whose depth has no end. Whom, then, can we adore?

The more Man becomes Man (sic), the more will he become prey to a need, a need that is always more explicit, more subtle and more magnificent, the need to adore. (Teilhard de Chardin 1957, p117f)

Teilhard is suggesting that sacred sexuality is about more than the peaks of human experience. In many of the traditions I have mentioned, sacred sexual activity is believed by its adherents to unite them to God, or to the cosmic energy which runs through all creation. In this way, it gives a profound sense of meaning and purpose to its adherents, as well as providing forms, rituals, channels, through which the tidal waves of our sexual energy and desire can be harnessed so that they enrich our total being. We may have questions about this; but the record suggests that religious practices can provide structures within which men and women have been able to integrate their most physical desires with their most spiritual aspirations.

Sexuality and the sacred in conflict

Although we may want to maintain that sexuality and spirituality go hand in hand, the reality, for many people, is that they exist in total opposition. What they want – those who are religious – is to have God remove, or cure, or control their disordered desires.

As a psychotherapist, though, and also as a priest, I regard their Eros as sacred. However split off it may be, and however possibly disordered in its aim, I see it as a vital part of their being which needs not exorcism but redemption, to use a theological word. The problem for these people, though, is that they are experiencing their passion almost as if it was possession by an alien spirit. This can be so frightening that if we are psychotically inclined, the stress may cause our psyche to fragment; or, if we are more neurotically constituted, we may not be able to imagine the difference between talking about our feelings and compulsively acting them out.

What can psychiatry, psychotherapy, and spirituality offer which will enable these people to move from experiencing their sexuality as an alien force, to enjoying it as an integrated energy which enriches them for passionate living? (By this, I don't just mean the sexual act).

The Psychotherapeutic Approach

From the psychotherapeutic point of view, such people will need a relationship within which they can process their experience, both intellectually and emotionally, so that they come gradually to recognise that the alien spirit

which appears to possess them is actually an aspect of themselves. Hopefully, as part of this process, their compulsive attachments and fixations will be loosened, splits healed, or at least bridged, and projections withdrawn, so that the emotional energy liberated can become available for more ordinary living. This transformation, when it occurs, is bound to have a major impact on their lives. We might find, for example, that their existing partnership is enriched or comes to an end, in which case they may move into a new one; or find that they are now able to live independently; or, again, maybe they discover that their predominant sexual orientation is different from what they have previously imagined.

This is from a psychotherapeutic point of view. As previously described, religious beliefs and practices may assist the therapeutic process, but this is not always the case. I have come to feel that there is a significant prognostic difference between what I call 'Dogmatic' and 'Experimental' religion.

Dogmatic Religion	Experimental Religion
1. You accept it or reject it	Allows thoughtful access
2. Mistrusts subjectivity	Values subjectivity
3. Declares things good or bad	Allows you to find out
4. Tends to split good and evil	Accepts shades of grey
5. Anxiously held (conditional love)	Values doubt
6. Deals in magic (words, rituals)	Sees religion as relationship with unbound object.
7. Literalistic	Capacity for symbolism.

No one presents either extreme in pure form; but my experience, at the assessment stage, is that the more features of dogmatic religion shown by a potential client, the poorer the therapeutic outlook. This is at least partly because these clients are usually members of churches which reinforce these mental attitudes, and which sometimes bring pressure to bear on those who question their teaching. Conversely, the adherents of 'experimental' religion often benefit considerably from psychodynamic psychotherapy.

Supportive psychotherapy in a group setting

When providing a group approach to working with the religious and sexual thoughts of people suffering from more severe forms of mental illness, we try to understand the religious and sexual thoughts presented in relation to the whole life experience of the speaker, not pathologising their ideas, but looking out for possibly disregarded connections with their everyday experience. Discussions often range around problems of causality: what has happened to make me think, or feel like this? An either/or approach might collude with psychotic states of mind, or simply dismiss the patient's ideas as 'nothing but' their illness. We try to restore the links between body and spirit: valuing physiology and psychology, but

also recognising the importance of the spiritual dimension for all who seek meaning in their lives.

Conclusion

In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima tells Socrates that Eros is a great spirit, half-god and half-man: "Being of an intermediate nature, a spirit bridges the gap between (the gods and men), and prevents the universe from falling into separate halves" (Plato 1951, p81). In the mental health field, anything which prevents the universe from falling into separate halves has got to be important. From ancient times to the present day, people have recognised the significance of Eros for this task.

Note: Case material used for illustration in the talk has not been reproduced in this text for reasons of confidentiality.

References

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