

ON SPIRITUALITY AND SEXUALITY

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From an existential perspective the link between what Sigmund Freud calls primordial desire (*trieb*) and personal existence has been broken by a reduction of the meaning of human sexuality to eroticism. With this break, a loss of meaning has emerged which was once given as one's most natural expression of the potential to be a pro-creator of existence.

Today's questioning of the principles of Christianity is professed to provide sexual liberation for persons who now demand the right to give total meaning to their own experience. This break can be seen as a depletion of essential meaning or as a signal of sexual liberation, a move toward individual and personal freedom. For Freud the development of the individual is:

...a product of the interaction between two urges, the urge towards happiness, which we usually call 'egoistic,' and the urge towards union with others in the community, which we call 'altruistic.'¹

This describes how the individual is caught between these two conflicting urges, with the struggle for individuality commonly referred to as one's identity.

In essence, the cosmological significance of a single life gaining clarity in meaning through union with another for the divine purpose of handing down future life has been subjugated to erotic pleasure of the self. Andrew N. Woznicki's exposition on the issue of sexuality as an expression of "integral love" described by Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, updates the relationship between sexuality and the sacred:

In this "cosmic transmitting of existence," human love causes "man-person" to be not only a simple producer of life but also a pro-creator with God-the-Creator of each individual human existence.²

The responsibility of giving life ceases to be a destiny when sexuality is reduced to eroticism. The meaning of human sexuality then, is depleted of its contact with the Divine and becomes an end in itself for itself. In this reduced state, the sacred as a mode of self-transcendence found in the cosmic-vital transmission of existence removes the sexual act from its proper context of integral love, responsible love, leaving it within the confines of mortality, within the horizons of human finitude. Pope John Paul II comments:

“Lust” turns away the intentional dimension of the man’s and woman’s mutual existence from the personal perspectives, “of communion”, characteristic of their perennial and mutual attraction, reducing it, and, so to speak, pushing it towards utilitarian dimensions, within which the human being “uses” the other human being, for the sake merely of satisfying his own “needs.”³

From an existential approach, meaning constitutes the basis of a person-world unity. The resulting experience of the conflict between love and lust is described by the Holy Father:

The “heart” has become a battlefield between love and lust. The more lust dominates the heart, the less the latter experiences the nuptial meaning of the body, and the less it becomes sensitive to the gift of the person, which, in the mutual relations of man and woman expresses precisely that meaning.⁴

In self-mastery one tempers desire, the human heart stays closely connected to its own values. In lust the human heart turns away from these values, moving away in desire and thus turning toward lust, becoming empty of the ethical dimension provided by value. In this critical way, the heart resides in between love and lust.

Many who are in therapy experience a fundamental split between the sexual dimension (bodily) and the remainder of personal meaning. Self-identity is sought through a search for sexual liberation and one’s sexual identity. Often this split is recognized to be rooted in the relationship between the body and the ego or the role of the body in relation to one’s self-experienced identity. Nowadays, people are more inclined to perceive the meaning of the “I” and the body as separate entities, when in reality, there is no separation between me and my body. We are incarnated beings. Existential, experiential perspectives, like those of Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, offer opportunities to re-vitalize and restore the sacred dimension of human sexuality in the light of new aspects of modern-day life. The meaning-giving functions of the body emerge from the spontaneous dialogue between the body and its world. The fact that the body is my spontaneous entrance into a reality which permeates and surrounds me is a very crucial insight provided by existential phenomenological approaches and methodologies. That I discover the world and others through my body reminds me that I am not a robotized automaton, nor a disembodied self. From this perspective the body’s relationship to the sexuality of its nature is not reduced to functional expression of unknown energies. My body is already a meaning-giving essence.

An existential psychological approach reveals that depersonalization leads to experiences of personal dis-integration, anonymity and isolation. This is evidenced by today's fervent search for meaning, for self-meaning, for self-identity. This is reflected by changes found within the quality of interpersonal relations and the struggle to define the contemporary marriage ethic. At some level, this affective distancing created by one's single-handed responsibility for one's own being precludes one's freedom to openly affirm that which is beyond one's own self. The sacred or spiritual affinity one experiences with the Divine is turned away from and is seen actuated within daily life in one's relationships with other people. Pope John Paul II elaborates:

Sex, however, is something more than the mysterious power of human corporeality, which acts almost by virtue of instinct. At the level of man and in the mutual relationship of persons, sex expresses an ever new surpassing of the limit of man's solitude that is inherent in the constitution of his body, and determines its original meaning. This surpassing always contains within it a certain assumption of the solitude of the body of the second "self" as one's own.⁵

Restoration of this integral connection between spirituality and human sexuality leads to establishment of a right relationship in marriage. Woznicki underscores the essential nature of Divine Love as the context for person-to-person love:

Love is an existential disposition for self-realization of my being through an act of recognition and affirmation of the other in the order of goodness.⁶

Questions of today seek meaning which goes beyond the biological function of human experience, taking us into dimensions of meaning which can only be examined by existential and metaphysical foundations. A life view with the person regulated by the economics of biological historical determinants leaves the person cut off from the experience of one's personal potential for self-transcendence. Freud's conception of the unconscious signaled that a break in human experience was coming but as unable to adequately reach beyond the break.

In Freud one can see the inextricability of what is spiritual and what is sexual. Clearly it can be seen how the biological approach to consideration of the physical and instinctive aspects of sexuality as separate and independent from its emotional, cultural and spiritual aspects is fallacious. As a pure biological function, depleted of its God-given essence, the human meaning and experience of sexuality is shifted to the anonymity of non-personal functionality. Pope John Paul II comments:

Ricoeur described Freud, Marx and Nietzsche as “masters of suspicion”, having in mind the set of systems that each of them represents, and above all, perhaps, the hidden basis and the orientation of each of them in understanding and interpreting the *humanum* itself.⁷

Illustrating the results of this suspicion, John Paul II goes on to say:

In the Nietzschean interpretation, the judgment and accusation of the human heart correspond, in a way, to what is called in biblical language “the pride of life”; in the Marxist interpretation, to what was called “the lust of the eyes”; in the Freudian interpretation, on another hand, to what is called “the lust of the flesh.” The convergence of these conceptions with the interpretation of man founded on the Bible lies in the fact that, discovering the three forms of lust in the human heart, we, too, could have limited ourselves to putting that heart in a state of continual suspicion. However, the Bible does not allow us to stop here. The words of Christ according to Matthew 5:27-28 are such that, while manifesting the whole reality of desire and lust, they do not permit us to make this lust the absolute criterion of anthropology and ethics, that is, the very core of the hermeneutics of man.⁸

Wojtyla accentuated the importance of tenderness in human relationships provided within the institution of marriage. It is imperative for the right development and flow of meaning which carries personal meaning between spirituality and human sexuality. In marriage, as an example of the transmutation of physical sexual expression in responsible love, the union occurs within the context of one’s potential for transcendence.

The problem has become a question, one which questions the separation between faith, personal identity and sexuality. The fall of sexuality into insignificance truncates the transcendent dimension of human experience. This is reflected in the quality of interpersonal relating. Quoting Wojtyla, Woznicki brings this to clarity:

Without this affirmation of the value of a person, love disintegrates and, in fact, does not exist at all, even if the reactions or experiences coming into play, are of a ‘loving’ (erotic) character.⁹

Problems are not something people have but are something that have become, something which expresses one aspect of personal being. This includes the experiential domain of spirituality in relation to human sexuality. The sexual dimension of human existence is not isolated from the

whole of experience or from any of the other dimensions of personal existence. It is quite the reverse, one's sexual orientation is intimately intertwined with one's wider value context, with the identification that allows a single person to transcend mortal finitude. To conclude, the Holy Father's remarks on the alliance between the human heart and the ethos of the redemption of the body through self-mastery are presented:

...the ethos of the redemption of the body is realized through self-mastery, through the temperance of "desires", when the human heart enters into an alliance with this ethos, or rather confirms it by means of its own integral subjectivity: when the deepest and yet most real possibilities and dispositions of the person are manifested, when the innermost layers of his potentiality acquire a voice, layers which the lust of the flesh, so to speak, would not permit to show themselves. Nor can these layers emerge when the human heart is bound in permanent suspicion, as in the case in Freudian hermeneutics. Nor can they be manifested when the Manichaeian "anti-value" is dominant in consciousness. The ethos of redemption, on the other hand, is based on a close alliance with those layers.¹⁰

Notes

- 1) Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 87. (Originally published, 1930)
- 2) Andrew N. Woznicki, *Karol Wojtyla's Existential Personalism* (New Britain: Mariel Publications, 1980), p. 39.
- 3) Pope John Paul II, "Depersonalizing Effect of Concupiscence", General Audience of 24 September 1980, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City, no. 39 (651) September 29, 1980, p. 11.
- 4) Pope John Paul II, "The 'Heart' a Battlefield Between Love and Lust", General Audience of 23 July 1980, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City, no. 30 (643) July 28, 1980, p. 1.
- 5) Pope John Paul II, "Marriage One and Indissoluble in First Chapters of Genesis", General Audience of 21 November 1979, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City, no. 48 (609) November 26, 1979, p. 1.
- 6) Andrew N. Woznicki, "Philosophy of Love and Community", *Migrant Echo*, 2, no. 2 (April-June 1973), p. 72.

- 7) Pope John Paul II, "Power of Redeeming Completes Power of Creating", General Audience of 29 October 1980, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City, no. 44 (656) November 3, 1980, p. 9.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 9) Andrew N. Woznicki, *Karol Wojtyla's Existential Personalism*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
- 10) Pope John Paul II, "Christ Calls us to Rediscover the Living Forms of the New Man", General Audience of 3 December 1980, *L'Osservatore Romano*, Vatican City, no. 49 (661) December 9, 1980, p. 20.