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The Christian Understanding of Sexuality

IN my previous article, "Morality, Old and New", I remarked that it was no accident that the word "morality" often carried with it in common use a reference to male-to-female and female-to-male behaviour. Although this is an unwarranted contraction of the meaning of the word "morality", it reminds us that intimate personal relationships are of the very stuff of life. Our sexuality is a very important fact about us. When we examine our use of words, we find the same wider and narrower use of the word "sexuality" as we found in the case of the word "morality". "Sexual" in the broader sense refers to sex in its totality, whether male or female, and includes mental and emotional as well as physical elements. In its narrower sense it describes differentiation of sex or sexual intercourse or, as in recent times, the pleasure or happiness that is believed to come from it, as in the phrase "We want sex". The concentration on this narrowed sense of the word at the present time springs from our pre-occupation with the physical aspects of sex. The peril follows that these physical aspects are separated from the larger life-relationship between two people of which they form a part, an exceedingly important part, but only a part. Let me illustrate by quoting an old saying. Its impact is likely to raise a smile or a laugh, unless we happen to be very strait-laced. "Marriage is much more than four legs and a bed". Marriage *is* indeed a business of four legs and a bed. Those who do not recognise this are looking for trouble. But those who do not recognise that it is much more than this are also looking for trouble.

Sex, in its wider but even more in its narrower connotation, is one of the most frequently discussed subjects of our day—in newspapers, in books, on radio and television. This exploration of the meaning of our human sexuality is something we cannot bring to a halt. It has its origin in the desire to understand ourselves. It is all the more powerful because for so long sex was almost a taboo-ed subject. There is no alternative to thinking

our way through to such conclusions about sex as may afford us reliable guidance for living. No one will doubt that such guidance is necessary if he gives a moment's thought to such facts as unwanted children, the growing practice of abortion, broken marriages, promiscuity and prostitution.

I want to try to expound in this article the Christian understanding of sexuality. Is there really a Christian understanding of sexuality? When we are willing to acknowledge that Christians are often divided in their opinions, it might be more honest to say that we are working towards such an understanding rather than that we have already achieved it. J. B. Priestley says somewhere that every human being and every nation has a bright face and a dark face. We might say the same of the Christian tradition in regard to sex. Its bright face may be summed up in the phrase, *a blend of reverence and realism*. The realism springs from the acceptance of human nature and its constitution, the reverence from the Christian doctrine of personality as created in the image of God. Both are found in the Bible. They are combined in a typically Biblical insight which describes the sexual meeting of man and woman in the expressive phrase: "they knew each other". The dark face of the Christian tradition in regard to sex is found in the exaltation of virginity, so that chastity tends to be construed in terms of sexual abstinence, with marriage a second best. As a result of certain interpretations of the early chapters of the book of Genesis and of the teaching of Augustine the general impression left by the Church's teaching for at least the first fifteen centuries was, according to Dr. Sherwin Bailey, undoubtedly "that the physical relationship of the sexes was regarded by religion as unworthy, if not as shameless and obscene". The Christian Church is only now liberating itself from this crippling legacy.

This double-sided character of the Christian tradition with regard to sex suggests that we need to be specially sensitive to the points at which it is to be criticised and those at which it may need to be defended. Objectivity is eminently desirable. Misunderstanding is still prevalent, even in unexpected places. St. Paul, for example, has come in for some very hard words, not all of which are justified. In his much-read Reith lectures *This Island Now* (Penguin), Professor G. M. Carstairs gave Paul something of a drubbing. "Is chastity the supreme moral virtue?" he asked. He went on: "For him (Christ) the cardinal virtue was charity, that is consideration and concern for other people. It was his intemperate disciple, Paul, an authoritarian character, who introduced the concept of celibacy as an essential part of Christian teaching" (p. 49). One must say that the description of Paul as "intemperate" and "authoritarian" hardly squares with the facts. We have to remember that Paul's views were shaped by several factors—his belief that "the end of the world" was

imminent, his awareness that the single life could be wholly devoted to God, the tradition that man is the "head" of the woman. Despite this the basic features of a high view of the relation between the sexes are discernible in his letters. There is throughout his writings that blend of reverence and realism to which we have already referred. Marriage is a one-flesh union which goes very deep, mirroring the intimate relation between Christ and His Church. There is a wise recognition that the discipline of sexual restraint within marriage can be carried too far. There is a fine understanding of mutuality and complementariness between marriage partners which goes far to offset the traditional view of male superiority and lordship. We have the impression as we read what he writes that only a married man could command the sensitiveness he shows; and indeed it is not impossible that he had been married.

We could embark upon discussion of the Christian view of sexuality by a further examination of the idea of sexuality itself. It would be more in accord with the Christian tradition, despite its earlier exaltation of virginity, to begin with what has been and still is regarded as the norm, namely, marriage. This need not mean that celibacy is to be regarded as an inferior state. That would be to repeat, in reverse, the error of the earlier centuries. Indeed there is something to be said, from the Christian point of view at least, for the argument that there is a vocation to marriage and a vocation to celibacy. Max Thurian has made out a good case in his book *Marriage and Celibacy* (S.C.M.).

Let me begin by making four statements about the Christian understanding of marriage. In view of diverging opinions I dare claim no more than that these four statements are common to a growing consensus among Christians of all Churches. I cannot go into the question whether marriage is a "sacrament" in the technical sense of the word. It must suffice to say that I take the general Protestant stance that it is *not* a sacrament. It is not of Dominical institution although He recognised it as grounded in God's order of creation. It cannot, as in Roman Catholic practice, be made dependent on Holy Order since this would invalidate all non-Roman marriages and, if extended, all civil marriages. But this does not imply that we cannot have a "high" doctrine of marriage. We can.

The first statement I want to make is that marriage is a commitment for life based upon love and fidelity. The Old Testament speaks of the covenant by which God binds Himself to men and thereby binds men to Himself. We could use the word covenant of marriage. The second statement is that by nature and by a necessity more than natural marriage is completed by the coming of children and the life of the family. Just as the love of God does not remain moving only within the circle of the divine being but goes out from itself in creation, so the love of man and

woman for each other finds expression in reproducing their kind. A child is at once the expression of human love and a new object for that love which takes it beyond itself and prevents it from growing inwards. In the third place, marriage is a matter of concern not only for the individuals involved in it but for the society in which they live. As a focus of community on a small scale it is a stabilising factor. A large-scale breakdown of marriage affects the health of the larger unit. This brings us to the fourth and more controversial statement, that although marriage is intended to be a lifelong commitment, its substance can dissolve because men and women are weak, selfish and wayward. When this happens, divorce becomes a possibility and hence remarriage. The word "indissolubility" which we have so often used in the past must now be used to indicate not that marriage is a sort of iron law to which we have to submit but that it is intended to be a binding covenant which love itself needs for its preservation. The phrase now in general use, "irretrievable breakdown", points to an inescapable fact of life and to the Christian duty of pastoral care towards those who have experienced it.

Where, it may be asked, does the avowed Christian ideal of chastity come in? Chastity, one must admit, sounds an old-fashioned word. But it will serve to raise a problem which is met within marriage and beyond it. "Chaste" comes very close in meaning to "pure". Unfortunately, when used in a sexual context it is often taken to mean "untouched by sexual intercourse". I note, however, that the dictionary equates chastity with purity "from *unlawful* sexual intercourse". It is not, in fact, a defensible Christian position to argue that intercourse is in itself bad or that abstinence from it is in itself good. It is possible to be unchaste without ever having slept with anyone. And we have all met married people who have a purity about them which may quite properly be described as chastity.

Because of the prevailing moral permissiveness and the new problems raised by the advent of contraceptive methods, including the pill, it is necessary for Christians to re-think chastity as moral purity. There is chastity on the way to marriage, chastity within marriage and chastity where marriage is unlikely or impossible.

Chastity on the way to marriage has to do with the total attitude and the whole range of activities of the two people concerned. Their enjoyment of each other ought to contain an element of respect, even of reverence. Sex, in its narrower sense, has to be faced honestly. Refraining from intercourse at this stage in the journey is not a denial of the sexual nature of man. It is a recognition that the full expression of love is part of the life-commitment which we call marriage. The discipline of restraint may at times be irksome—what discipline is not?—but can be accepted by thoughtful lovers as part of the larger schooling of life and as a means to a higher good. Such discipline when gladly accepted

bears witness both to a high standard and to the power of God and is especially needed today when young people feel the pressures of early biological maturity, moral permissiveness and the urge to conform. A gay puritanism may be one of our deepest moral needs at the present moment. But it must be entirely free from a holier-than-thou attitude, a facile condemnation of those who take another path.

What of chastity within marriage? In a justly famous book *Reason and Emotion* John Macmurray described chastity within marriage as the integrity with which two people who loved each other came together. This is a valuable insight. Chastity is not simply self-denial. It can also be glad, reciprocal self-giving. But here too discipline and restraint find a place. When Paul uttered the much criticised words "It is better to marry than to burn" he was not saying that marriage is a passport to the unbridled expression of passion. He knew that within marriage control was necessary just as he knew that an excessive and prolonged asceticism was unwise.

There is also chastity outside marriage, where the likelihood of marrying is remote or plainly absent. One of the least quoted but by no means the least significant of the sayings of Jesus is the following. "While some are incapable of marriage because they were born so, or were made so by men, there are others who have themselves renounced marriage for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" (Mt. 19:11-12). These words remind us that there may be different kinds of reasons for not marrying. It is unfortunate that unmarried people are often regarded as people who have missed the boat and are therefore to be pitied. This may arise from the mistaken notion that there can be no full human life, no lasting happiness apart from life together with a partner of the opposite sex. But one can choose to be and to remain unmarried just as one can choose to be married. Nevertheless there are many who do not have the opportunity to marry and whose condition is one of relative unhappiness in the absence of other forms of fulfilment.

In recent years we have discovered that there is a fairly large class of people who cannot easily or at all enter into satisfying hetero-sexual relationships. The fact of homo-sexuality constitutes a relatively new problem for Christian ethics. Since the Wolfenden Report appeared one is conscious of growing sympathy and understanding for homo-sexual men and women. But it is also true that the older and condemnatory attitude still flourishes, with an element of distaste or revulsion at the heart of it. Despite research, I do not think we yet know enough about the causes of homo-sexuality to make confident pronouncements. We are still at the stage of exploration. The really troublesome question is this: "Granted that there are homo-sexuals who are incapable of hetero-sexual relationships can the Church see the possibility of respon-

sible and continuing homo-sexual relationships which can be approved?" One of the factors which cannot be overlooked in seeking an answer to this question is that, as a recent writer puts it, homo-sexual partners can never know "the joy of having children, a joy which brings a hetero-sexual relationship into a whole new dimension". Granted that homo-sexuality constitutes a problem of a special kind, it would still be right to say, from the Christian position, that unmarried people, whether hetero-sexual or homo-sexual, must be willing to be guided by the standard of chastity or moral purity.

What of the significance of contraception for a Christian understanding of sexuality? One must immediately register the conviction that contraception has come to stay. Like many other devices, it brings dangers as well as blessings with it. It can be abused, both within marriage and outside it. The correction for abuse is not rejection but responsible use. The nub of the matter for Christian thought is the nature of Christian love in its relation to sexual intercourse. If sexual intercourse is only permissible for procreative purposes, then contraception must be regarded as wrong. But if intercourse is not only procreational but relational, i.e., if it expresses and confirms the love-relation between man and woman, then it can happen without the intention to bring a child into the world. This means contraception by artificial means or, in the alternative, by "natural" means, the so-called rhythm method used by Roman Catholics.

We have become familiar in recent years with arguments in favour of artificial contraception because of the "population explosion". Even where the explosion is not known there is a case for the limitation of families or family planning. Archbishop Roberts of the Roman Catholic Church makes a very interesting statement in the book *Contraception and Holiness* (Collins, Fontana) which shows how the idea of rational limitation is finding its way into quarters where once it was by no means welcome. "The whole purpose of human sexuality is not to produce as many children as possible; it is to produce as many children as it is possible to cherish and educate in a family where love—and this includes the sexual love of husband and wife—is the informing principle" (p.18). What speaks there is the voice of Christian commonsense.

What of the Papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*? Let me try to say something first about the *content* of the encyclical and then about the *intention* behind it. The encyclical attempts to give moral guidance to Catholics, but has a wider than Catholic audience in view. Very briefly it concedes a place, within marriage, for birth control but only in the form of the rhythm method; it stresses the perils for morality that arise from the widespread and irresponsible use of contraceptives; and it urges the value of a degree of ascetic control of the sexual urge within marriage.

Like others I find a good deal of the content of the encyclical highly questionable—the theological defence of the rhythm method and the allegation that contraceptive methods degrade women, to take only two examples. But I can understand the *intention* of the Pope and indeed find myself in sympathy with it. He is concerned about the health and sanctity of marriage and wants to do his utmost to preserve them. He sees that if we succumb to a permissive morality we are heading for decay. An insidious philosophy of creeping sexual hedonism threatens to overcome us all. Malcolm Muggeridge with his flair for the apt phrase has put this kind of philosophy in a single sentence—“An orgasm a day keeps the doctor away”. We need the moral seriousness, the sense of discipline, the joy in human love as a gift from God which are so conspicuous in the Pope’s pronouncement; but these things need to be placed in a rather different setting and given a rather different grounding from what we find in the encyclical. First, methods of birth control are not in themselves sufficient; there must be control of birth control if we are not to be mastered by the instruments that we ourselves have devised. While this comes down in the end to *individual* responsibility, the Church has a duty to offer guidance to the individual. Such guidance will cover marriage but also the period before marriage. In the second place, sexual intercourse must be seen as a part, although a necessary and extremely important part, of the larger whole of a shared life. It influences and is influenced by that whole. Just as there is both joy and discipline in that life as a totality, so there is joy and discipline in this special aspect of it. Here as elsewhere Christ must hold sway.

Let me conclude with some reflections on the modern pre-occupation with sex. As I have already suggested, there is no alternative to finding a way through the confusions of the present sexual crisis by hard thinking. It is possible to see a certain ambivalence in our concentration on man’s sexual nature. On the one hand, the pursuit of sex and of sexual happiness may be an unconscious pursuit of meaning, of significance. Sexual desire, especially outside the bounds of marriage, is not necessarily only a blind striving for pleasure or fulfilment. It is also a search for the other, for relationship, for the reality of giving and receiving. Psychologists have often noted that a man may be promiscuous not because he is “over-sexed”, endowed with super-abundant sexual energy, but because he is seeking in woman after woman the affection denied him by his mother.

On the other hand the pursuit of sex may be a flight rather than a search, a flight from anxiety, a losing of oneself in the shoreless ocean of love. The Christian faith legitimises the search for the other by its teaching that man and woman have been made for each other by God. But it sees the flight into sex as an avoidance of the other and of genuine meeting with the other and

calls for the integration of the life of sex with that of the larger relationship of which it is a part. It prohibits anything like idolatry in personal relationship or the use of each other by men and women as the instruments of mere pleasure.

In the first article I maintained that dynamics and form, freedom and order are both necessary to each other and that what we are seeing today is dynamics threatening to burst old forms, freedom striving to break out from existing orders. It must often appear to the Christian that he can do very little to control and even less to halt the eruptions that are taking place in regard to sex and other aspects of life today. There are at least three things he can do. First, he can set an example. The Christian must be prepared to be different. In the laxity of the Roman Empire the first Christians were known for their purity and integrity. So it must be with Christians today. There is no Christianity without cost. In the second place, the Christian can continue to expound the Christian understanding of human sexuality, whether in marriage or outside it, in the hope that some who are searching for meaning will find it in the Christian faith, with its high estimate of man and its moral empowerment. Finally, he can point to what we call the Gospel, the good news of a divine love which comes to us both in demand and in offer. It holds us to what is highest and best and at the same time provides the inspiration and the resources to live in the light of high ideals without being driven to despair by them and to achieve what we could not have achieved without God.

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