

REDEEMING ASCETICISM

By JANET MORLEY

IT IS HARD to use the word 'asceticism' without engaging profoundly negative associations. For the modern Christian, the concept is surrounded with an aura of rejection of what is good and fulfilling in this world; to call someone an ascetic is to imply that they are self-punishing and obsessive, and that their spirituality is likely to be narrow and repressed and self-absorbed in an unhealthy and unliberating way. This perception is in part due to an over-dismissive attitude to an older approach to spirituality, and arises partly because the Christian ascetical tradition has undoubtedly had its share of neurotics, and has helped to encourage the wrong kind of self-denial. But it is also that in current terminology, 'asceticism' as an idea seems to be at the opposite pole from any possible kind of liberation, either of individuals or of groups. It is also associated with that deep rejection of material things and of the flesh that has pervaded Western culture for centuries, and from which we have had to work so hard to free ourselves. And the 'evangelical counsels' of the religious life, that spring out of the ascetical tradition—poverty, chastity and obedience—appear to speak of the same kind of gloomy self-limitation, relating to an ancient, individualistic piety, which is of small relevance either to our personal goals of self-realization, or to the political realities we presently live with.

However, it may be helpful to consider the derivation of 'asceticism', both as a word and a process. The root means 'training'; and, at its best, asceticism has always been focused on training *for* something, on achieving clarity and insight through giving up what is acting as a barrier or distraction to that insight, rather than being directed merely to the negative aspect of 'giving up' as some kind of weird virtue in itself. And, as far as poverty, chastity and obedience are concerned, it has been pointed out that this trio quite accurately defines the areas that are likely to be places of both struggle and insight in our spirituality: our relationship to material possessions; our sexuality; and our exercise of power.¹ So

far from being irrelevant considerations, it is evident, when the antique vocabulary is re-phrased like this, that we are touching on matters not merely of concern to the modern spiritual quest, but on areas of political sensitivity. If this is so, then the desire to 'liberate traditions' here is not of minority interest, but is a task of much wider significance. I want to focus the task by concentrating specifically on chastity, since I believe that it raises a number of the important underlying issues; and because its recent widely-publicized 'come-back' as an idea in the political arena makes it particularly urgent that we be clear exactly what reclaiming the Christian idea of chastity does and does not mean.

Faced with the need to respond to the crisis caused by the spread of AIDS,² it appears that the Churches are busy reclaiming the age-old virtue of chastity. A report from the Board of Social Responsibility of the Church of England urges the British government to advocate chastity in its public health campaign, and the report goes on to assert: 'Unchastity is contrary to the natural law and it is therefore not surprising that human bodies are often ill adapted to it, as is evidenced by the spread of the AIDS virus'.³ And the Mothers' Union, a large traditional women's organization in the Church, has particularly welcomed this point. Though this example happens to come from official statements of my own Church, I suspect that similar comments are emerging from other Church bodies, and that they reflect some of the reactions of individual churchgoers also. I feel quite uneasy about this hasty championing of 'chastity' in this way. For although the advocacy of old-fashioned virtue is always accompanied by the acknowledgement of the need for pastoral care (and it is clear that in less vocal parts of the Church, such as religious orders, much is being *done* for AIDS victims) there is a worrying tone here and, I think, there are still more worrying assumptions. It is not exactly that the advent of an appalling killer disease is welcomed as a sort of guarantor of traditional moral values, but it is difficult to resist the impression that a claim is being made here about the proven value of the Church's traditional teaching on chastity. It is important to look at what 'chastity' seems to mean in this context, because I fear this kind of reclamation of the term may well reinforce the negative and distorted aspects of Christian teaching, rather than redeeming what is positive and life-enhancing.

Ironically, considering that the Church attempts to address with a different perspective the malaise of modern culture, this use of

'chastity' immediately concedes one of society's common misconceptions about sexuality: namely, that it consists solely of genital activity. This idea is implicit in making a parallel between 'chastity' and other means of avoiding AIDS; for 'unchastity' here must refer specifically to those acts which are likely to transmit the virus. And so our attention is focused on a highly simplistic view both of sexuality and chastity: the only question about how we use our sexuality is 'how far can we go?'; and chastity is quite simply defined as not 'doing it', except in the context of marriage. Now, this view of the issue may correspond quite well with the popular perception of the Church's line on sex (it is against it, except in marriage). But I suggest that if the best we can do is to provide a list of precise technical answers to the question 'how far can we go?', then not only have we produced a reductionist understanding of chastity, but we have failed to engage with any profound questions about what human sexuality is, in its widest sense.

We should also note that when 'chastity' is produced as a solution to the threat of AIDS, we have shifted the meaning away from the area of moral choice and are describing behaviour that is simply prudent. To suggest (as the BSR report does) that it would be better to recommend chastity than condoms because the latter are not 100% reliable is to propose chastity, not as a positive goal for life, but simply the most effective means of avoiding this kind of death. Of course people need to be warned about precise risk and danger, both to their own life and that of others, but to confuse such a warning with moral guidance is to use the spectre of AIDS rather in the way that the threat of hellfire used to be evoked. Again, moral teaching backed up by fear may be more or less what people expect of the Church, but is this really the whole extent of what the Christian tradition has to offer? I hope not. I also feel anxious about any use of the concept of chastity which seems to offer it as a finished 'solution' to the problems of our sexuality. If we are honest, those of us who have consciously chosen Christian chastity, whether as monogamously married people or as professed celibates, recognize that it is as likely to be a place of struggle and painful self-exploration in our sexuality as a place of rest or easy fulfilment.

A third assumption that seems to me to be lurking behind the Church pronouncement I am examining is that chastity is essentially about limitation and control of the flesh, in order to keep it free from pollution. The report asserts that unchastity naturally

results in various ills of the flesh. Now, there are some problematic connections being made here between notions of moral corruption and observation of physical disease. Promiscuous activity is proposed as the root cause of a physical illness, confusing the means by which it is spread with the reason for its existence. This kind of link that is asserted between moral evil and physical affliction is clearly absurd when parallels are produced. For example the fact that humans can catch typhoid from a polluted water supply does not thereby make drinking immoral; nor does the fact that many kinds of wickedness (cruelty, injustice, selfish greed) have no evident physical ill-effects on the doer alter their moral status. I suspect that the ease with which the false parallel has been adopted in this case has a good deal to do with the underlying suspicion of the flesh that our culture inherited from neo-Platonism. Although an incarnational faith affirms the flesh as good, and conflicts with any tendency to divide the human persons up into the (higher) soul and the (lower) body, nevertheless we are still inclined to feel that the flesh is paradigmatically the place of human fallenness, and the appropriate locus of punishment for sin. The dreadful disease that AIDS is, with its progressive and relentless pain and debility, too accurately models what we fear the flesh is really about. Thus, AIDS victims are treated as untouchable, not because of real infection risks, but because of a hardly articulable fear and rejection of the flesh which is triggered in us. That the Church should be making statements that reinforce rather than challenge such a view of the flesh is itself appalling; and once again a negative view of chastity is offered. It is no more than freedom from pollution; it is limitation; it is denial and mastery of the flesh, which otherwise threatens to sink into corruption.

A final assumption I want to challenge relates to the idea of unchastity being 'unnatural'. This is to suggest that chastity, as a virtue, is ahistorical in identity; it is about individual sexual purity, and has precisely the same meaning in all historical periods whatever one's gender or sexual orientation. Perhaps the Church has often tended to present Christian virtues as ideal states, tied to the commission or (more often!) non-commission of certain acts, equally open to achievement by all groups of people, and carrying the same significance, whoever displays them. This has been true particularly of chastity. Roger Ruston points out that religious orders very often understand the vows of poverty and obedience to be historically conditioned, requiring debate as to their appropriate

expression, given particular circumstances.⁴ Not so chastity, which is assumed to be everywhere and to everyone the same thing. But this cannot be true; evidently, the requirement for chastity, in the Church's traditional terms, offers a very different set of choices to heterosexual and homosexual people. And I hope I have shown that to wave the flag of 'chastity' will be to evoke a particular, historically influenced set of meanings, depending on the immediate concerns of our society. It is also true that the choice to be chaste or not has had very different meanings for men and for women. Not only has chastity been tied in, for a woman, with the guarantee of her material and financial support (if she is a wife), but symbolically, the sexually chaste or unchaste female body has been invested with a significance quite different from that of the male. The rejection of the flesh, which I have suggested underlies Western culture, has often been represented by images of the female body. This means that if we are in any sense incorporating an anti-bodily stance in our understanding of chastity, then for a woman to choose it (especially celibate chastity) may seem to require a denial of her femaleness also.

So, I am anxious that the Church's reawakened enthusiasm for chastity in the context of the AIDS crisis may revitalize the most negative parts of the ascetical tradition: the limiting of chastity to the 'giving up' of certain polluting acts; the evocation of fear as a basis for morality; suspicion of the flesh; and a belief in ahistorical 'virtue' that may well conceal deeply sexist attitudes. Overall, then, I am concerned that the Church's reclamation of chastity in this way will simply re-present it as being *against* certain kinds of behaviour. I want to see whether we can reclaim chastity as a liberating Christian concept, and thereby redeem the positive value of this aspect of the ascetical tradition, exploring what it might be *for*. To do this, I shall propose chastity as a Christian response to three models (and, I believe, false models) of the relationship between sexuality and salvation. By 'salvation', I mean to imply all that the attempt to live the Christian life might be for, in its broadest sense. The three models are:

- Sexuality, the disposal of one's body for sexual purposes, is completely irrelevant to salvation.
- Sexuality is highly relevant to salvation, but in a negative way. The pursuit of salvation requires the mastery or erasure of the sexual body.
- Sexuality is itself the source of salvation.

In exploring and arguing against the first two, I shall enlist the support of St Paul (perhaps a surprising choice in view of his

popular reputation on this subject). However, a careful reading of 1 Corinthians, as Angela West has shown,⁵ reveals some fruitful theology about the body in all its aspects, little of which has been used and remembered by Christian tradition. What is remembered, of course, is the famous phrase: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.' Taken as a definition of chastity, this displays all the features we should deplore: implied negativity towards the body; a male perspective which locates temptation in woman; and an ahistorical ring which suggests—*not under any circumstances*. However, it appears that Paul never asserted this. 1 Corinthians is only one side of a correspondence, and frequently Paul is engaged in quoting a previous letter from the congregation back to them, so that he can argue against their assertions. And it is so in this case. In other parts of the letter, he is concerned with qualifying another assertion, namely 'Everything is permitted'. So he is dealing with both extreme asceticism and total permissiveness at the same time. Curiously, these two strands, so apparently divergent, seem to have arisen out of the same ideology of the body. About the same time as the Christian Church was beginning to spread, there was a cluster of belief known as gnosticism. Characteristic of gnosticism was the theory that the material world (and therefore the human body also) was some kind of mistake—not a divinely-intended creation at all. Only the spiritual part of human beings, the divine spark, was capable of salvation. The body was simply a temporary prison for the soul. Out of this assumption arose two kinds of practice among the Corinthians. The first was permissiveness: if the body was irrelevant to salvation, sex was just like food—another appetite to be satisfied however you liked, with no moral content whatever. So it did not matter if Christians practised incest or visited prostitutes; this was all part of their freedom in the gospel. The other practice, of refraining from sexual activity altogether, even if you were married (and your partner was going up the wall about this sudden enthusiasm for abstinence), was presumably based on the following idea: if the body was not to be saved, if it was indeed a prison and a distraction to the soul, then the sooner you succeeded in erasing it altogether the better. And what more effective proof that your spirit was in charge than successfully giving up sex?

These two strands—that the body is irrelevant to what *really* matters, or that the body must be controlled, erased, mastered—have a number of modern parallels. It is not uncommon for

politically radical movements to contain a dismissive attitude to the significance of personal sexual relationships: compared with the importance of working for the revolution, these are mere private details. Spending energy on sexual morality is a meaningless distraction; it is politically neutral. However, in the permissive sixties, as women discovered to their cost, radical creeds often masked deeply conservative and sexist behaviour. Women's position in the revolution was prone, and sexual liberty turned out to mean the requirement for women to service radical men, but without any of the traditional commitment and security in return. It took the women's movement to insist that the personal was political, right there in the bedroom.

However, conservative Christian tradition has tended much more to be seduced by the other practice—the attempt to control the body fiercely. Paul's metaphor of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit (originally a corporate image) has been interpreted in terms of rigid individual avoidance of sexual pollution. When applied to marriage, this has given us the 'blueprint' theory of sexuality—that this institution is the only possible means of human happiness and sexual fulfilment. It is this blueprint which I suspect the phenomenon of AIDS is invoked to support. When applied to religious celibacy, it is still possible to find strong negative images about dominating and subduing the body: chastity is then the mastery of human values, and to live it is to master the sexual condition, to master sentimentalisms and their attractiveness, and to master them for a higher good.⁶ I do not think the use of the word 'master' four times in this sentence is accidental. Implicit in it is the taming of the body, imaged as a seductive woman.

Another ideology which pervades Western culture, and which in fact pointedly demonstrates the common origin of these contrasting bodily practices is libertinism, the justification of pornography. Susan Griffin's analysis of the phenomenon⁷ shows how this ideology, while purporting to be permissive, libertarian and freely erotic, is actually characterized by themes of punishment, humiliation, bondage, even torture of the sexual body, typically imaged as a woman, to be 'mastered' by the male user of pornography. Griffin sees it as an example of a deep-rooted dualism and alienation from the body in our culture. The body, and qualities associated with it—vulnerability, weakness, tenderness, emotion—are distanced and projected onto the image of a woman. She is then punished for representing all that the pornographer cannot own in himself;

and also for the self-violation that such an activity entails. Use of pornography is addictive and requires endless repetition, because of course the sexual body cannot be so easily defeated and controlled. So far from freeing eroticism, it is an enslavement.

Interestingly, what Paul tells the Corinthians to avoid has the same verbal root as 'pornography'. It is *porneia* that enslaves. In reply to those who argued that sex was just like food, a bodily act irrelevant to salvation, Paul insists: there is no such thing as non-symbolic sexual behaviour. In his famous and startling comparison between sexual intercourse with a prostitute and incorporating into the Body of Christ, he makes it clear that the body is not a neutral irrelevance: it is the locus of powerful symbolic meaning. The disposal of my body for sexual purposes matters profoundly, not because I ought to avoid technical pollution, but because I am thereby making a significant statement about which 'body', which community, I am committed to, and *how* I am committed to it. In a parallel way, Paul is outraged by Corinthian behaviour at the Eucharist, where different amounts of food and drink emphasize differences in status and class between members of the congregation. It is not that food in itself is polluting; but to make *this* kind of statement through a bodily act is a scandal to the fundamental equality of the Body of Christ. So also theories about the 'naturalness' of either promiscuous or monogamous behaviour are pure naivety; to be in the body is to inhabit a social and symbolic universe, where our behaviour has reverberations for the group with which we identify ourselves. To be 'chaste' will be to recognize that it matters what kind of statement I make with my body—how I relate physically to people all the time, and not just whom I go to bed with.

Paul also attacks individualism in sexual behaviour, whether the concern is for individual freedom from constraint, or for individual attempts at sexual purity. He takes a line that requires equal mutual commitment from men and women. His basic premise seems to be that individual choice of sexual lifestyle should be subordinate to the principle of whatever builds up the Body of the Lord, and whatever will recommend it to those outside. As he says, 'The body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body' . . . and the practical result of this will be, not to be dismissive of the body or its needs, but simply to choose whatever causes least distraction from the central priority. If setting up a sexual partnership is going to involve you in being continually obsessed with

yourself or your partner, well then, do not do it. On the other hand, if *not* engaging in sexual activity is going to leave you continually absorbed either with your own purity or your frustrated desires, well, it is better to marry than to burn.

This pragmatic attitude of Paul's is deeply offensive to modern sentimentality about sex, but it seems to me that a commitment to chastity is going to involve us pulling against the strong temptation to invest our own sexual, emotional and romantic feelings with an enormous and all-consuming significance. This is not because I am inclined to be dismissive: I do believe that our sexuality is a crucial place of growth and learning. But I think there is the possibility of obsession, which is just as unhelpful as dismissiveness or negation. It is here that I want to look briefly at the third false model I proposed, namely, sexuality as the *source* of salvation. This myth is strong: so that we often load our sexual relationships or our sexual lifestyle with immense expectations—on their success depends our whole self-worth and fulfilment. There is evidence of this romanticism in the modern Anglican marriage service; eschewing the Pauline bluntness of the Book of Common Prayer (1662), all sorts of rather vague mystical ecstasies are promised to the couple through their union of one flesh. There is a similar romanticism in books on the religious life, which dwell on the sacred relationship you can have with your heavenly bridegroom. I suspect that it is the huge weight of expectation around sexuality that also gives rise to the industry of technical 'how-to' books on sex, to save us from almost inevitable disappointment.

Now, some of the Church Fathers distrusted this kind of passion directed at human beings. Jerome proposed that 'a man ought to love his wife with judgment, not with passion', and Luther apparently recommended that couples should have intercourse twice a week, precisely so as to inoculate themselves against an excess of passion for each other.⁸ The point was that only God should be loved in that way. This theory sounds quaint to modern ears; and it certainly gave rise to some destructive attitudes towards creaturely love. Passion for other human beings, God's creatures, was perceived as a distraction from the love of God, rather than providing our primary, reverberating metaphor for that love. But perhaps the opposite temptation for us is to so load our intimate relationships with our need for salvation that we actually ask the

other person to be God for us. And this is unchastity, in marriage or out of it.

The truth, however, is contained somewhere in the dialogue between these two positions. If we are to know God, then it is *in* the body and not out of it that we shall come to do so. That is why deep sexual yearning for another person is not just an analogy of our longing for God, but a means of knowing it. Similarly, the honouring of boundaries between us may also be a means of encountering God. And yet the desire for God cannot be equated with bodily ecstasy; this is one kind of triumphalism. Nor can it be equated with controlling or setting the body aside; this is another, negative triumphalism. Western culture veers schizophrenically between the two: and I do not think it is helpful if the Church does the same. The attempt to be chaste, in this context, will involve challenging every kind of false 'solution' to human sexuality. The search for God in the body cannot ignore historical realities, or the corporate implications of sexual choices and priorities; and chastity will mean an ongoing dialogue between appropriate boundaries and appropriate self-abandonment. Let us see that we do not use our bodily boundaries to restrict or oppress the Body of the Lord, but to build it up; and let us not allow our sexual or emotional abandonment to serve as a substitute for falling into the arms of God.

NOTES

¹ I am indebted to Dr Grace Jantzen for these insights, in an undergraduate lecture, King's College, London, 1986.

² Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, a fatal disease frequently venereally transmitted, for which there is at present no cure.

³ Quoted in the *Church Times*, (London) December 19th 1986.

⁴ Ruston, Roger O.P.: 'Religious celibacy and sexual justice', *New Blackfriars*, Sept. 1982.

⁵ West, Angela: *Sex and salvation*, unpublished paper, March 1985.

⁶ Riddick, Joyce S.S.C.: *Treasures in earthen vessels: the vows* (St Paul Publications, 1984).

⁷ Griffin, Susan: *Pornography and silence* (Women's Press, 1981).

⁸ Quoted in Singer, Irving: *The goals of human sexuality* (Wildwood House, 1973).