A LANGUAGE OF DESIRE

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IT HAS OFTEN BEEN REMARKED that in human sexuality we can find a uniquely human integration of the best, most profound love of which humankind is capable with the particular physical animal nature that is our evolutionary heritage. In sexual desire love is not universal and generalized, it is particular and passionate and embodied. At the same time, unless it is distorted, it is tender, committed to the well-being of the beloved even at great personal cost, joyful and self-giving and celebratory. It can also be the most troubling aspect of our existence.

All of this is so obvious that it would not need rehearsing, were it not for one thing that is seldom noticed: the ingredients of sexuality at its best are also precisely the ingredients of the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ are united the particular animal physicality of a Jewish male with the profoundest love of God, in the most troubling encounter the world has ever known. God's love in Christ is revealed to be not vague and sentimental and generalized, but embodied in a particular time and place, and with a passion for the well-being of those Jesus loved which led him to the cross rather than betray his commitment to them.

When we compare the ingredients of human sexuality with the ingredients of the Incarnation it is obvious that there is sufficient analogy that an understanding of either would be illuminating also for the other. The more in touch we are with our sexuality the better equipped we will be for understanding the Incarnation; and the more we enter into the meaning of the Incarnation the more we will be able to celebrate our sexuality. At least, that is the conclusion that we might have expected to draw from the parallels so far noted.

The irony is that typically a strong separation between the two is maintained. The claim that in the language of human sexual desire we find the concrete articulation of the love of God in Christ is bound to be seen either as a lofty sentimentalizing of sexuality that does not connect with the pleasure and pain of our actual passions, or, if it really *is* taken literally, as shocking and even blasphemous: how dare we compare the love of God with the

urgent, often troubling and painful and sometimes wounding, experience of physical passion?

The complete separation of sexuality from our understanding of the Incarnation is a commonplace of Christian teaching through the centuries, but that does not make it less appalling. It is scandalous that a faith that bases itself on a particular instance of embodied love should have so little place in its doctrine for sexuality, so little recognition of the theological significance of the erotic. Yet in great works of theology over the centuries any discussion of sex is usually reserved for the sections clearly marked 'ethics', where the moral rules and prohibitions about sexual expression may be discussed, usually with the implication that sexual desire, while a biological fact which requires an outlet in carefully prescribed contexts, is something of a theological embarrassment, and certainly a nuisance for serious spiritual development. We could be much holier without it.

Accordingly, sexuality is seen as secular: literally, having to do with the world. In Christian Latin usage 'secular' stood for the world not as the natural world created by God, nor as the human world of which the Church was a part and in which it was situated, but as the world contrasted with and opposed to the Church: the phrase 'the world, the flesh and the devil' shows clearly the connotations associated with the secular world in this usage. 'Secular' is a negative term, meaning 'not sacred', 'profane', and 'secularism' is defined as excluding from consideration ideas from religion or a belief in God or in life after death. Once we get locked into that framework or definition it is inevitable that sexuality will be seen as, at best, having nothing to do with spirituality, and at worst in serious conflict with it.

The extent to which this mind-set has gripped Christian thinking is evident from the fact that few of us would tell the story of our spiritual growth in language drawn from our sexual experience, let alone see the stories of our personal sexuality with all their joy and passion and pain as having anything to do with liberating us to follow Christ and enter more deeply into the desire of God. Of course we might think of sexual renunciation as part of spiritual growth; but (without denying that this is indeed a vocation to which some are called) that is not what I am talking about here. How many of us would see our own passionate sexuality as an icon of the Incarnation, to be celebrated and affirmed with mind and heart and body? How many of us can do so if our sexual

choices and orientations—whether for celibacy, or homosexual or heterosexual affiliations—fall outside the oppressive norms of contemporary respectability? And yet Jesus was outrageously unconventional if as a Jewish male thirty years of age he was childless and unmarried and associating intimately with both women and men!

The rejection of sexuality as an icon of Incarnation does not stand on its own. It is linked with a rejection of large aspects of our embodied lives as having anything to do with our spiritual growth, and an increasingly wide gap between what is seen as secular, belonging to a world utterly other than God. Our embodiment itself, our particular stories of how we find ourselves in time and space and relationship, our physical rhythms and linkage with the physical environment, are seen as somehow not related to our religious life, as extraneous or even in opposition to our striving for pure unencumbered relationship with God. Yet when we reflect on this, we can see that something has gone badly wrong. At the heart of the Christian gospel stands a story of particular embodiment in time and space and relationship, a story of one man's life and death. How is it that if that story of specific human experience is normative to Christian spirituality, other human experiences should be discarded as 'secular'? Clearly the exclusion of the stories of our embodied lives from our understanding of God constitutes a theological blunder of the first order, and seriously undermines our spirituality.

It is important to notice that there is a persistent strand in Christianity which has taken a different approach to personal story, embodiment and sexuality than that which I have described. In the writings of the Christian mystics erotic imagery and personal story is regularly used both as a method of teaching and as an expression of union with God. Christian mystics use their own experiences of hunger and thirst, desire and suffering, to better understand and teach the growth of the spirit: for them the routine as well as the unusual can be windows toward God. While most of them are no strangers to serious intellectual labour, they do not proceed merely by abstract or academic categories without connecting these to their own passions and experiences. And they use their own experiences of embodiment in ways that modern theologians would find shocking.

Thus for example Julian of Norwich, in a profound meditation on the way in which we are safely enclosed in the love of God, uses the following illustration to make her point:

> A man walks upright, and the food in his body is shut in as if in a well-made purse. When the time of his necessity comes, the purse is opened and then shut again, in most seemly fashion. And it is God who does this . . . nor does he disdain to serve us in the simplest natural functions of our body . . . For as the body is clad in the cloth, and the flesh in the skin, and the bones in the flesh, and the heart in the trunk, so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God.[1]

The way in which Julian experiences the tender care of God in the process of elimination, and uses it to explain her teaching, is hardly one which we find in modern theological books or sermons. The natural functions of our bodies are not often seen as having spiritual significance; Julian shows how impoverished we are in our relegation of our embodiment to the sphere of the secular.

When we think of the ways in which Christian mystics use their own stories to express and teach their spirituality, we are apt to think that the experiences they recount will be particularly religious in nature and quite other than our own daily lives: we look to mystical literature for accounts of visions and voices and levitations and ecstasies. Through a series of philosophical accounts of the nature of mystical experience reaching back through William James and Rudolph Otto to Schleiermacher and Kant we have been taught to equate mystical experiences with intense subjective phenomena, very different from our normal experiences.[2]

Of course it is true that accounts of such unusual happenings can be found, but it is also true that mystical writers warn their readers not to put too much emphasis on them and certainly not to equate having such intense experiences with spiritual growth. Meister Eckhart uses particularly picturesque language in his warning against separating off 'religious' experience from the experience of life:

> If a man thinks he will get more of God by meditation, by devotion, by ecstasies or by special infusion of grace than by the fireside or in the stable—that is nothing but taking God, wrapping a cloak round his head and shoving him under a bench. For whoever seeks God in a special way gets the way and misses God . . .[3]

In the context Eckhart is drawing a contrast between the ecclesiastical and monastic establishments of his time who had leisure for

meditation and devotion and theological pronouncements regarding the various 'special infusions' with which God might visit the soul, and the ordinary peasant men and women whose lives meant that they must seek God at the place of their daily experience and work, at the fireside or in the stable, or not at all. It might be thought that the former had a better chance of spiritual growth: with his vivid picture of wrapping a cloak around God's head and shoving God under a bench Eckhart punctures the idea that daily life and experience is less a place for God's presence than areas usually labelled 'religious'.

Christian spiritual writers often use their personal experiences and stories as an important part of their writing. Yet their books are seldom written primarily as autobiographical accounts of their own subjective experiences. Rather, their intention is to guide and instruct their readers in spiritual understanding of their ordinary lives, and to encourage their development toward God. This development is seen in terms of increasing purity of heart, integrity and compassion, letting their lives be stretched in the love of God and neighbour.

> When from the generous bounty of [a person's] good will he strives to reach out to all his neighbours, loving each of them as himself . . . indeed he has made himself vast. His heart is filled with a love that embraces everybody . . . Then the width, height, and beauty of your soul will be the width, height and beauty of heaven itself . . .[4]

The aim is certainly not to encourage the reader to have special spiritual experiences in a category removed from ordinary life, but to 'become vast' so that the beauty of one's soul will reflect the beauty of heaven.

This can be seen from an example nearest to the genre of modern autobiography, Teresa of Avila's *Life* written at the request of her spiritual director. Even in this case, the account of her experiences is explicitly intended to help her readers along the way of prayer. Though it contains more accounts of unusual experiences such as visions and levitations and ecstasies than do most books of Christian spirituality, it is nowhere suggested that these phenomena are essential to spiritual growth or that her readers should strive for them. Indeed on occasion Teresa speaks of them as though they were rather a nuisance, though more often she refers to them as

'favours'.[5] Her book is full of guidance from her own experience about such topics as temptation, choosing a spiritual director, what to do during times when prayer seems boring, how to focus on the humanity of Christ and become sharers of his compassion, and so on. Teresa's assumption is that her personal story, in all its particularity, will be of pedagogical value, and will help guide her readers in their spiritual journey.

Thus although the writings of Christian mystics are seldom autobiographical in the modern sense, they do frequently tell of their own spiritual journey. They offer from personal experience (which includes rigorous intellectual labour) instructions for 'The ascent of Mount Carmel', or 'The soul's journey into God', or 'The ladder of perfection' (titles of spiritual treatises by John of the Cross, Bonaventure and Walter Hilton respectively.) There is more to this method of instruction than simple literary convention, though this plays a part, let alone a desire to draw attention to themselves. It has to do, I suggest, with two things: a recognition of what sanctity is, and a recognition of how people in fact learn.

Sanctity in Christian mystical writing is not a question of being so heavenly minded that one is of no earthly use. The author of *The cloud of unknowing* has sarcastic comments about those who take up spiritual exercises as an inversion of the physical.

> For when they read or hear read or spoken how men should lift up their hearts to God, they look up to the stars as though they would reach above the moon, and cock their ears as though they could hear angels singing out of heaven . . . Some of these the devil will delude in a remarkable manner. He will send down a sort of dew, which they think to be angel's food, which appears to come out of the air and falls softly and sweetly into their mouths. And so it is their habit to sit with their mouths open as though they were catching flies.[6]

Spiritual growth is not about denying the physical or unhinging it in ways that invite psychic or demonic delusions. Rather, sanctity is a matter of following Christ, whose pattern is precisely the embodiment of love, not its disembodiment.

One of the ways in which this has most frequently been expressed is in terms of the 'imitation' of Christ, copying his actions and attitudes as portrayed in the gospels. Yet it is clear that we cannot mean by this a rigid or slavish copying without regard to the different social and environmental factors that form the context for

what particular actions mean. To take an obvious example, if, as seems likely, Jesus went barefoot or wore only sandals in first-century Palestine, the meaning of that is not equivalent to a discalced Carmelite going barefoot in sixteenth-century Spain, let alone to a Christian Inuit wearing only sandals in the Canadian Arctic Circle. The imitation of Christ, rather, has to do with *living* an incarnational theology: re-embodying in particular times and places and cultures the love and justice of God. Because times and cultures vary, what it *means* to imitate Christ will also vary and can never be rigidly prescribed. What we need, along with sincere and costly willingness, is a freeing of the imagination to see what embodied holiness might consist of in the specific concrete circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Now this is precisely what is provided for us in the personal stories of the giants of Christian spirituality. When we study them in their context we begin to see how in their various ways they imitated Christ: that is, how they relived the Incarnation, the embodied love of God. Frequently that led them to countercultural and subversive activity; regularly it led them to see the physical and moral outcasts of their societies as the focus of their ministry. When we get past the saccharine coating of hagiography that is all too often infected with a refusal to see embodiment as intrinsic to spirituality, we find in the saints women and men of flesh and blood who knew how to live and love and suffer in their own contexts in ways reminiscent of how Jesus lived and loved and suffered in his. Thus as Karl Rahner has argued, saints are women and men who have shown us what it is to be followers of Christ in their own unique places and times, and who thereby open us to new ideas for our attempts to be followers in turn, not by rigid imitation, but by living the gospel of liberty and justice in our own contexts.[7]

Accordingly, the telling of their stories, and the telling of our own, is absolutely essential if we are to develop spiritually. The importance of models and shared experiences is part of what is involved in the idea of the imitation of Christ; models must be at the centre of spiritual epistemology. We measure our own stories of embodiment and passion and justice against the stories of those who have gone before us, and ultimately against the arms of the cross. Consequently there is no theological substitute for speaking from experience or telling our own stories, not as though these

stories are unflawed, but as the context for our understanding and action as we learn increasingly to embody the glory of God.

Fundamental to all learning is desire. This is true even at an intellectual level, where the desire to understand generates the questing for answers and the connection of thoughts without which pedagogy is to no avail. It is even more true of our spiritual learning. The motivation for union with God is God's overwhelming attractiveness: God is the one who is absolutely desirable. The quest for spiritual union is not undertaken out of some sense of pious duty, nor as the logical consequence of doctrines held to be true, but in the first place out of love, desire, based on the desirability of God. What the mystics seek to do in their books of spiritual instruction is to point to the difficult beauty of God, bear witness to the divine wonder, in such a way as to stimulate in their readers the same longing for God which they themselves know. What their stories show is how the attractiveness of God is embodied again in new places and times in ways that give us teaching and insight and hope.

A large part of such teaching must consist of stories which show how the yearning for God can be discerned and fostered, how the barriers to it can be broken down, so that its presence can be recognized and its attraction felt. Deceptive attractions, false beauties, must be revealed for what they are, and steps taken to make the soul receptive to the grace which alone can remove our blindness and coldness to the divine beauty. So in the stories of the spiritual giants there is much about asceticism and purgation, much about discernment and truth and self-knowledge. But the aim of Christian spirituality is not just moral improvement, but to open the soul to the *glory* of God as revealed in the embodied Christ, and to increase our capacity for God by the measure of our longing.

This is ultimately why our sexual experience is primary for our spiritual growth, and why the mystical writers so frequently use a language of desire to expound their teaching. In sexual passion we find an integration of embodiment with love and longing; and it is precisely this integration which also describes the desire of God: particular, concrete, and passionate, not general and abstract and disengaged. Probably the most persistent metaphor and overarching model for Christian spiritual writers comes in the theme of God as lover, the one who desires and draws the soul. The language of desire, not least ungratified desire, is one of the most significant

in Christian spirituality, reaching back at least as far as Origen writing on the *Song of songs*, the biblical poem whose frank eroticism made it one of the texts most regularly commented upon as a vehicle of mystical teaching.

There are those who have held it to be paradoxical that writers who emphasized celibacy and took great pains to preserve it should use such erotic language. There are also those who offer the cynical interpretation that their erotically tinged mystical experience and teaching was a direct and unwholesome result of their sexual repression, which could be expected to breed just such neuroses. However, apart from the fact that the lives and writings of most mystics demonstrate an attractiveness and liberation which would hardly be compatible with the sorts of sexual neuroses sometimes attributed to them, these responses have also missed the point that is fundamental to the use of erotic metaphor by the mystical writers: namely that the embodied love of human sexuality is an icon both of our desire for God and of God's desire for us.

In mystical writing the erotic imagery is by no means always used to express fulfilment and satisfaction. There can also be the recognition of severe pain and frustration: mystics frequently talk about the *wound* of love, For instance, Ruusbroec in *The spiritual espousals* writes, with reference to the invitation to union with God,

> A person is thereby wounded in his heart from within and feels that wound of love. Being wounded by love is both the sweetest feeling and the sharpest pain that anyone can experience . . . When the inmost depths of the heart and the very source of life have been wounded by love and when a person finds himself unable to obtain what he most desires but must forever remain where he does not wish to be, then from this twofold source arises the pain.[8]

The mutual illumination of sexuality and spirituality does not rest on our sexual longings being perfectly fulfilled, but rather in our being in touch with our desires, even when they are painful and conflicted. The desire of God is wholly unsentimental: it has much more to do with crucifixions than with pink roses on the covers of books of pious doggerel.

A spiritual writer in whom the passion and pain of unfulfilled sexual longing is given especially poignant expression is the thirteenth-century Beguine poet Hadewijch.

But although I have no fish,
I do not want any frog;
Or any elderberries either,
Instead of a bunch of grapes:
Although I have no love,
I do not want anything else,
Whether Love is gracious to me or hostile.[9]

The fish and the grapes have obvious allusions to biblical texts of Jesus feeding his disciples and giving them wine, and the latter merges with connotations of the wine of the Eucharist. Frogs and elderberries have superficial similarities to fish and grapes, but are no substitutes for the real thing. The revulsion at any substitute for the love of God, the bitterness of such a cup, is conveyed far more effectively by metaphor than it would be by literal prose. They arouse the senses to *feel* the revulsion of frogs, *taste* the bitterness of elderberries, producing a strong response of disgust which mingles and interacts with the cognitive insight into the inadequacy of the ersatz. In doing so, they also unify the articulate and the inarticulate, generating ripples that spread beyond the conscious mind and draw into the whole response reverberations from the preconscious and inarticulate.

Now if I am correct in my suggestion that the aim of much mystical writing is to attract its readers to God, to help them to love and delight in God and expand their desires for God, then what is wanted is precisely this unification of cognition and affectivity in a response of the whole personality. Unthoughtful sentimentality will not do; neither will cold rationality. What is needed is desire. Desire motivates and integrates thought and feeling in such a way that the best efforts of mind and heart are combined toward a single goal.

This is why it is that the more we are in touch with our desires, especially our sexual desires—our longings and celebrations and delights, our pains, frustrations and insecurities—the more we can enter into the longing of God. To split sexuality off into the realm of the secular is simultaneously to abandon some of its deepest meaning and to impoverish ourselves of a source of spiritual illumination.

This is a very far cry from an artificial binding together of spirituality and sexuality that hedges sexuality around with prohibitions, or suggests that we ought to pause to think pious thoughts

or offer a prayer while making love. Neither does it leave room for a privatized, subjectivized spirituality that does not take embodiment—and hence working for justice not least for those experiencing sexual oppression—fully seriously. But then, as we have seen, such embodied passion is exactly what the Incarnation is about.

NOTES

[1] Julian of Norwich, *Showings* Long Text 6; Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, New York, and SPCK, London, 1978), p 186.
[2] See my 'Mysticism and experience' in *Religious studies*, autumn, 1989.
[3] Eckhart, Sermon 13b, in *Meister Eckhart, sermons and treatises Vol I* trans M. O' C. Walshe (Watkins, London, 1979), p 117.
[4] Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermons on the Song of songs* 27.11; in Cistercian Fathers series No. 7 (Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1976), p 84.
[5] Teresa of Avila, *Life,* ch XX, XXII, XXIV.
[6] *The Cloud of unknowing*, ch LVII; Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, New York, and SPCK, London, 1981), p 230.
[7] Karl Rahner, 'The Church of the saints' in *Theological Investigations* vol 3 (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1967).
[8] John Ruusbroec, *The spiritual espousals*, part 2A; in Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, New York, and SPCK, London, 1985), p 85.
[9] Hadewijch, 'No frog, no elderberries', *Poems in couplets* 9; in *The complete works*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Paulist Press, New York, and SPCK, London, 1980), p 333.