THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES AND SEXUALITY

Andrew Walker

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SACRED and the sexual in the West can be approached in two contrasting ways. First, they may be identified with each other: Paul Ricoeur suggests that there was once a time when sexuality and spirituality were closely connected, and when the erotic was incorporated into religious myth and ritual.[1] We see clearly from the Song of Songs, the lived prophecies of Hosea, and the experience of some of the great medieval and later mystics—not least from the famous 'transverberations' of Teresa of Avila[2]—that this approach is a part of the Jewish and Christian tradition.

But there is also a kind of dualism that rigorously divides the two: the sacred is perceived as something transcendent and separate. Sexuality is demythologized and confined to procreation within the institution of marriage; its power is restrained, disciplined and feared.

The Christian Context

In the early Church sexuality was associated with the fallen world.[3] The material world was believed to be coming to an end; and sexuality was bracketed with procreation and the family, so there seemed little point in the last earthly generations valuing it. Jesus, assumed to be single, was taken as the preferred sign of the coming Kingdom; Paul's letters

[1] See James Nelson, *The Intimate Connection* (London: SPCK, 1992), 31, citing Paul Ricoeur, 'Wonder, Eroticism and Enigma', in *Sexuality and Identity*, edited by Henrik Ruitenbeek (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 13–24.

[2] 'Teresa is celebrated for the miracle of the Transverberation—the physical piercing of her heart by one thrust of an angel's flame-tipped lance. … a recurrent dream experience in which the angelic lance penetrated her body' (Victoria Lincoln, *Teresa, a Woman: A Biography of Teresa of Avila* [New York: SUNY, 1985], xxxviii).

[3] I am indebted for much of the material for this section to the lectures of Philip Sheldrake and the writing of Peter Brown. For the former see his *Befriending our Desires* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2001), for the latter, *Body and Society* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

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show us the new forms of relationship that were considered appropriate to the end times (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 7:38).

The Church was also influenced by its cultural milieu—in particular by the Stoic Roman belief that the virtuous state was achieved by overcoming the passions and pleasure. So Gregory Nazianzen could say that the fall of humanity was caused by Eve being tempted by pleasure.[4] Virtuous—dispassionate—masculinity was the measure of what it meant to be human, and virginity became the ideal. There were of course exceptions to all this—Aquinas had a more positive theology of the body but this was untypical of the age and a part of his thought that was not much taken up.[5]

A separation developed in Christianity between *eros* (love that is passionate and particular) and *agape* (love that is universal and disinterested)—by contrast with the Jewish tradition, which continued to entwine the two. Hebrew, unlike Greek, has only one word for love. For Christians the *erotic* developed the meaning that it has in modern English, a meaning narrowly associated with physical experience, and spirituality tended to become disembodied. The underlying assumption seemed to be that the earthly body, and with it physical intimacy, were subject to decay and therefore unreliable.[6] The sacred, by contrast, had to be eternal and imperishable; and therefore, perhaps, it had to be kept at a distance from the physical to preserve its purity. This was reflected over time in the liturgy and in church practices: sanctuary screens were introduced very early on; the exchange of the peace was limited to the clergy before the end of the first millennium; and offertory processions were dropped during the Middle Ages. This all served to protect the sacred and distance it from contact with the bodily and the profane, but in the process the sacred was also isolated and circumscribed.

In the post-Reformation period Luther could write of 'a natural, ardent desire for woman' as 'God's law and doing',[7] but choosing

[4] See St Gregory Nazianzen, oration 18, in *Funeral Orations by Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose*, translated by Leo P. McCauley (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953).

[5] See, for example, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, 25.5.

[6] Bryan Turner writes: 'The frailty and eventual decay of the human body and the inevitable physical finitude of human beings provided an obvious metaphor for original sin and natural depravity' (*The Body and Society* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1984], 67).

[7] Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, edited and translated by T. G. Tappert (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2003), 273.

celibacy was still privileged.[8] Within the Anglican and other Protestant traditions clergy were permitted to marry, but marriage itself continued to make no accommodation for passion. Married chastity was interpreted, under the influence of St Augustine, as requiring the elimination of sexual desire.

The Counter-Reformation only reinforced the structures of separation within Christianity: between the sacred and the bodily, between spirituality and sexuality, and between celibate clergy and sinful laity. This led to division between those who dominate, control and dispense spirituality, and those who receive it. And there was little attempt in any tradition to explore or express how marriage and sexuality might actually nourish a Christian vocation, lay or ordained, until after Vatican II.[9]

Other forces were, of course, at work in the history that I have sketched very briefly here, but it would seem that the exclusion of the erotic element has played an important part in a growing separation between

Eve, *by Lucas Cranach the Elder*

[8] See Mark Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Oxford: Blackwell 2001), 58–62.
[9] Benedict XVI's recent encyclical *Deus caritas est* has importantly addressed many of the issues raised here.

the sacred and the spiritual, and the rest of human experience. Today our spiritual journeys need to be reconnected with the rest of our lives. They must come to involve seeking and finding God in the whole of human experience—risky, vulnerable and changing as it is—and in all our relationships, including sexual ones. And our handling of the Spiritual Exercises as directors should respond to the challenge of integration presented by this history.

Ways Forward with the Spiritual Exercises?

We have inherited from the past, above all from the Enlightenment and from Descartes, a concept of the self that sees its basis as a pure state of mind—something rational, interior, disembodied and desexualised.

The exploration of the self—not only what has been but what might be our experience—seems to me to be at the heart of the Spiritual Exercises. And that exploration both requires and gives rise to an understanding of the self in its relationship with God which is different, more integrated, and more complete than the one we have inherited.

The exploration of the self is facilitated in several ways as we make the Spiritual Exercises. As we reflect on the word of God and on our lives and actions in the light of it, so we engage with an unfolding and developing encounter with the risen Lord in a journey of prayer. We benefit from the guidance and example of the spiritual director as we make this journey—sometimes the director may be a step ahead, or sometimes one behind, but the freedom with which he or she exercises the role is a model for the freedom that we ourselves are invited into, and inspires our capacity to respond. The director may also need to respond to an invitation to greater freedom: an invitation to go against the assumptions, the conditioning or the limitations of personal experience. Finally we find a deepening experience of God, objective as well as subjective. A more grounded spirituality goes hand in hand with a fuller and more mature theology, of a God involved with and informing all human reality.

An unfolding and developing encounter with the risen Lord in a journey of prayer

An effect of this exploration in making the Exercises should be to reunite *eros* (seen as the narrowly sexual) with *agape* (a love that has become, on its own, detached and narrowly religious), thereby expanding and enriching our understanding of both, in life and in faith. We can see from observing the human societies around us that sex without the sacred produces lives without connection, and ultimately a

crisis of meaning and purpose, where the individual is confronted by the emptiness of self-gratification. While the sacred without sex loses its grounding in messy reality and leaves us with a purely intellectual God to whom it is easier to offer obedience than love. Religion is reduced to moral values and dutiful ritual, and ultimately confronts a crisis of duality, in which Church and society, faith and life, can seem to have little in common for the individual.

Our call, then, is to resacralise the erotic and to eroticize the sacred—releasing transformative passion back into our faith and selflessness back into our relationships, and opening up the real possibility of taking our place as co-creators with God.

In her book *Holy Listening*, Margaret Guenther explores the task or role of the spiritual director by using three more everyday images: the welcomer, the teacher and the midwife. I would like to use these images as a focus for what I want to say about the director, sexuality and the Exercises, relating them loosely to different Weeks or phases, although in fact the qualities I shall be talking about can appear throughout the whole process and journey of the Exercises.

The Principle and Foundation: The Welcomer

Guenther begins her account of welcoming by citing Genesis 18: 2–8, in which Abraham welcomes the Lord and two companions as guests. In terms of spiritual direction, she associates *welcoming* with providing others with a safe space, listening to their stories and identifying their needs, greeting them with openness and vulnerability, helping them to deal with any darker material in their experience and bringing the encounter to a close as and when it is appropriate.

So what might this mean to us with the perspective of sexuality and the Exercises? To welcome is to offer hospitality. All too often spiritual direction is a matter of two disembodied heads talking, and the body and sexuality are seldom discussed. For a director the question is: how far are you willing to offer hospitality to the person sitting opposite? Many of us are tired of the disproportionate amount of attention that the Church and modern societies seem to give to sexuality. But this frustration may communicate a message of exclusion to the directee. As Robert Marsh has observed, the least hint that you are receptive to hearing

For He Had Great Possessions, *by George Frederick Watts*

this sort of material openly will be greeted with relief.[10] On the other hand, even the slightest shift in body language can shut the line of communication down again.

Like every other aspect of human life, sexuality needs to be related to the centre and goal of life: the reign of God. If it is left at the door of the retreat house or the direction room it will remain unconverted. If discussion of it is delayed or left until the First Week, the old message that identifies sex with sin and the body with the fallen world is likely to be reinforced. Sexuality, therefore, deserves a place in the affirming world view of the Principal and Foundation.

In the Song of Solomon, 'sexuality is treated with restraint and affirmed without coyness or apology … the resulting love is seen as a communion of souls'.[11] Would then that the Song of Songs could be our model for approaching sexuality in spiritual direction; and would that we acknowledged all the myriad ways that sexuality is present in many, if not all, areas of life. Would that we could fully rejoice in a renewed sense of sexuality's spiritual power. Robert Marsh points out that the Hebrew word *yada* covers both knowing and sex, because both invite relationship and both demand

[10] Robert R. Marsh, '*Id quod volo*: The Erotic Grace of the Second Week', *The Way*, 45/4 (October 2006), 7–19.
[11] Michael V. Fox, 'The Song of Solomon: Introduction', in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), 1001.

transformation. How can we afford not openly to include sexuality in the whole journey of the Exercises?

The First Week: The Teacher

Here Guenther cites Mark 10:17–22, the story of the rich man who wanted to follow Jesus. In this passage Jesus is addressed repeatedly as 'Teacher', and Guenther associates this role with encouraging play, identifying limits, hopefulness, providing information, asking questions, offering challenges, and being willing to learn as well as teach. So again what might this mean to us here?

Mary Rose Bumpus and Rebecca Bradburn Langer[12] offer a list of questions for spiritual directors to ask themselves about sexuality, some of which I list, slightly paraphrased:

> Which of your current directees do you find most attractive and why?
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> Is there anyone—or any specific group—you would not be open to serving as a spiritual director?
>
> How might you deal with that if the issue only emerged after beginning the thirty-day journey together?
>
> When was the last time you were enmeshed in transference or counter-transference with a directee? What helped you retrieve the situation?
>
> What makes you happy, or unhappy, about being a woman or a man?
>
> Where and in what situations do you experience the most pleasure with your body?
>
> When have you experienced yourself as being most desirable to God?
>
> What part does passion play in your relationship with God?

Directors who are monitoring their own practice with questions like these will more easily exercise the role of 'Teacher' as Guenther identifies it. In this way they are more likely to avoid the dangers that arise from the separation of sexuality and spirituality. Because of this separation, the holy longing that draws us into intimacy can easily

[12] *Supervision of Spiritual Directors: Engaging in Holy Mystery* (Bellevue: Spiritual Directors International 2005).

Jesus and Nicodemus

become diverted into collusion or personal gratification. In a commentary on the Qur'ān, Abdullah Yusuf Ali wrote:

> … sex, which governs so much of our physical life, and has so much influence on our emotional and our higher nature, deserves—not our fear or our contempt or our amused indulgence but our reverence in the highest sense of the term.[13]

This reverence for sexuality is critical for both director and directee, I would suggest, as the power and the danger of the erotic become apparent in the First Week. It is best safeguarded by the kind of discernment that the director's constant self-questioning prompts.

[13] Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān* (Beltsville: Amana, 1999), 183.

The Second Week: The Midwife

Guenther cites John 3:2–4, the gospel passage in which Jesus discusses rebirth with Nicodemus; and she links to the figure of the midwife the attributes of patience, offering presence and support, helping directees deal with uncertainty, focused activity at the time of most need, and, finally, celebration.

In 1964 a church report entitled 'Towards a Quaker View of Sex' commented that,

> … we need a release of love, warmth and generosity into the world, in the everyday contacts of life, a positive force that will weaken our fear of one another and our tendencies towards aggression and power-seeking. We need to recognise fearlessly and thankfully the sexual origin of this force.[14]

As we explore the role of the Trinity and the person of Jesus, the erotic force for connection and creativity that empowers the divine love is difficult to resist, and at its heart lies the journey of intimacy. John Futrell talks of God being so carried away with love for the world that the incarnation becomes inevitable; it is the risks of love and the exploration of our personal fears that we explore in the early part of this Second Week, particularly in the key meditations.

Sexuality, Spirituality and Ignatius

In his magisterial *Ignatius Loyola: Psychology of a Saint*, W. W. Meissner has discussed Ignatius' own sexual identity fairly extensively: the effect on him of the early death of his mother, the macho culture of his day, his early promiscuity and later libidinal struggles.

But Meissner also attests to Ignatius' largely successful repression, on the one hand, and sublimation, on the other, of his sexuality. Perceptions have now changed of what is desirable and appropriate with regard to repression and sublimation, but it remains true that sexuality needs to be faced directly during our journey inwards. We may feel we need permission for its presence to be identified and its ramifications explored, but at some point that raw experience needs to be transmuted, given boundaries and transformed as part of the process

[14] Alistair Heron, *Towards a Quaker View of Sex* (London: Friends Home Service, 1963).

of crafting an apostle, of discovering Christ within oneself and oneself in Christ. The full spectrum of responses, from repression through sublimation to open expression, is available as we engage in the journey of transmutation, transformation and choice.

While Ignatius eschewed sexual activity in his maturity, the erotic dimension continued to fuel his prayer, his ministry and his apostleship. It has been said that Christianity does not understand sexual passion in the same way that the world does not understand chastity. The Exercises are one of the ways that understanding of both can come, and through understanding we can achieve growth and maturity as children of God.

For once sexual passion and chastity, *eros* and *agape*, are reunited in a focused and appropriate experience of human and divine desire so ecstasy comes and so the potential for union comes. The movement from election through the Third and Fourth Weeks to the vision of the contemplation surely mirrors this journey.

Andrew Walker is Rector of St Mary Woolnoth in the City of London, and Director of the newly established London Centre for Spirituality, based at St Edmund's Church. He is a Psychosynthesis counsellor, as well as acting as a supervisor and co-director of the Ignatian Spirituality Course offered in London. He is the author of a book of Easter meditations, *Journey into Joy* (London: SPCK, 2001).