

# CELIBACY AND DEPRESSION

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I HAVE BEEN ASKED, in this article, to examine and evaluate a possible link between the profession and practice of celibacy as a way of life and the human experience of more-or-less chronic depression. One difficulty in doing this lies in the 'marriage' of the two disciplines of theology/spirituality and psychology which such an exploration necessarily involves. Each concept has a life and history in its own discipline; moreover to each would-be explorer one of the disciplines is likely to be 'home' ground and the other 'away'. The home ground is usually the more familiar and the greater understood.

In writing for a periodical such as *The Way*, my assumption is that spirituality is the home ground and psychology the away ground. It follows that I have to take pains to attempt to make clear the nature of the away ground, and in so doing admit my psychological focus and bias.

I am writing from a place within the psychological community and tradition that builds upon the work of Freud and the enlargement and modification of his thought that came through the work of Melanie Klein, the ego psychologists, and those we may collectively label as 'object relations' theorists, among whom I am drawing particularly upon the thought of Donald Winnicott, Ronald Fairbairn and Harry Guntrip.<sup>1</sup> The term 'object relations' itself poses a dilemma: technical psychological language—like its theological counterpart—tends to be unhelpful to the uninitiated. It is difficult to do without it completely, but one of the tasks of an interdisciplinary venture must be to reduce the degree of incomprehensibility.

As I see it, Freud's original thought focussed upon the concept of unconscious conflicts, particularly those relating to fundamental human drives and instincts such as hunger or sexuality, being driven out of conscious awareness because of their anxiety-provoking nature. He felt the impact of the personal early environment of the individual to be crucial in producing this state of affairs, but

his reflection tended to emphasize and explore the ensuing balance of energy *within* the person. Those who came after him focussed more upon the primacy and nature of the *relationships* that a person can make with other people (objects) in the environment.

This shift is important in a discussion of problems associated with celibacy. Do they stem from the suppression, repression or inhibition of the basic instinct and drive of sexuality or from the disorders of relationship to which the sexual drive makes a part of and not the whole contribution?

I should say here that I have not in my experience and thinking followed the alternative story of development given by Freud's one-time friend and colleague C. G. Jung. This may prove to be a major limitation in this article but setting it out here may enable readers to be aware of it and take it into their own thinking. All psychological exploration and therapy is concerned with the *individuation* or making whole of the person, but I am more at home with the way of coming to this via the exploration of our early personal history and its effects on later life rather than via the reconciling, in individuals, of the balance of hypothesized *universal and collective* tendencies within the human psyche. Jungians will talk of the *animus* and *anima* representing the contrasexual aspects of our psyche. I inevitably more easily think in terms of internal parent and other images that we have built up from our historical stories. I do see this as in some sense limiting, and I do not want to deny the collective dimension—conscious or unconscious—but I cannot make it the focus of my exploration.

I hope that this last paragraph may illustrate the inter-disciplinary problem; psychological thought, like theological thought, is not uni-dimensional nor without internal conflict and inconsistency. In consequence conclusions are inevitably subjective and have to be tentative.

With this note of caution perhaps the best way to let the two themes of celibacy and depression interact is to work a little on each of them within their home ground before attempting a rendezvous.

#### *The nature of celibacy*

The definition given by John Dalrymple in the *Dictionary of pastoral care*<sup>2</sup> is 'the voluntary renunciation of marriage for the sake of kingdom of heaven' with the biblical material of Matthew

(Mt 19,10-12) as its basis—difficult and even offensive as some of its language may seem to us to-day:

‘Not all men can receive this precept but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom.’

Dalrymple goes on to say that vocation to celibacy does not stem either from a fear of sex or hatred of women (or men), thereby implicitly naming two of the other motives that can in fact give rise to a technically celibate life. He gives the following *positive* reasons for a life of celibacy: greater pastoral availability, single-mindedness, liberation for prayer—so making a connection between the energy used in prayer and that expressed in sexuality—liberation for prophecy and witness to the eschatological hope of the gospel and the proclamation that not all love is sexual. The risks of celibacy, he suggests, lie in comfortable bachelorhood or old-maidness, in less rather than more availability to people and in abuse of power.

It is interesting that the risks are all couched in terms of some sort of falling short by the celibate person in relation to God, other people or society. They do not focus on what the celibate person can do *to himself or herself* when the ideal cannot be fully actualized in living. This despite the warning in Matthew that not all can take it or the more explicit statement in Genesis (Gen 2,18) that ‘it is not good that man should be alone’.

Implicit in most traditional definitions of the ideal of celibacy has been the principle of abstinence from sexual genital relations. Sometimes this has included the requirement of virginity, sometimes not. Such abstinence would follow from Christian moral teaching concerning sexual relations outside marriage. But in the 1970s when secular sexual mores underwent a considerable revolution, spiritual writers also questioned whether celibacy involved, *per se*, the forgoing of sexual, genital relations, though such as Georgen in *The sexual celibate*<sup>3</sup> reaffirm that it does. However Georgen and others make an explicit distinction between the sexual (genital) and the broader affective dimensions of relationships, and argue forcefully that forgoing genital relations does not preclude nor absolve celibates from the task of relating intimately to others

on a non-genital level. The tenor of such writing is that a life of celibacy does not and must not preclude love and commitment.

So Georgen says 'It is the goal of celibate love to socialise and universalise one's affectivity in the direction of compassion which is the supreme sign of an integrated sexual life'. Gallacher and Vandenberg in *The celibacy myth—loving for life*<sup>4</sup> say something similar when they talk of celibacy as involving a 'binding relationship of a priest with his people. It would be a contradiction in terms to expect a man to be a priest, and then expect him to live as a bachelor.' William Kraft, in *Sexual dimensions of the celibate life*,<sup>5</sup> again emphasizes this 'universalizing' dimension when he talks of the need of celibates to avoid the 'spirit of marriage' as well as sexual relations, by which it seems he means the 'legitimate possession' of each other by a married couple which is not open to him or her who is living the celibate life.

From these writings it seems that the essence of celibacy is to be found in its 'alone' aspect, and in the call to universal rather than to particular love, and that in so far as a sexual genital relationship is only appropriate between two people who are committed and contracted to each other, celibacy must also involve the renunciation of genital relationships.

It is, though, significant that all this is based on the concept that the only alternative to a life of celibacy is heterosexual marriage. Some complicating factors should be noted. The fact of homosexual relationships and experience needs to be taken into account as also the 'first state' of those who embrace celibacy. Do they come to it as a renunciation of sexual love already experienced or from a place where that dimension has not ever been aroused? The distinction between celibacy and bachelorhood or spinsterhood is not explicated. A distinction between genital and affective love is made: the former is to be renounced and the latter developed. This seems equivalent, psychologically, to an inhibition of *instinctual* behaviour, but a mandate for the development of 'relatedness'—but relatedness that is not directed towards *an* other. Gallacher and Vandenberg<sup>6</sup> go on to talk of celibacy as a 'charism' and as 'not something that fights against human nature...basic needs for love, belonging, self-worth and autonomy will be met'.

In summary, celibacy is seen to be to do with both instinctual drives and relationships, yet these two aspects are quite sharply distinguished. Despite the biblical warnings that it may not be good for all, it is laid on whole groups of people—priests and

religious as part of their vocation, and less directly on all for whom marriage is not an actual or potential possibility. There is some degree of promise—that because it is asked there will also be given grace to meet it, and with this the fulfilment of basic needs. In this the writers seem to be following Maslow's<sup>7</sup> hierarchy of needs, but to my mind in a rather upside-down manner. Maslow says, I think, that people can attend to the higher needs of autonomy, self-actualization and self-transcendence only when the basic needs of hunger and for belonging are met. Yet some of the writings I have cited seem to be implying that in espousing the 'higher' aim the 'lower' needs will somehow also be fulfilled. Such appears to be the theological and spiritual premise and promise, but there remains the question 'is this way round psychologically possible for us?'

At this point I want to leave the theme of celibacy for a while and address the concept of depression.

### *Depression*

The experience of depression varies from the well-nigh ubiquitous yet transient 'fit of the blues' to a persistent, destructive and life-denying force that grips hold of people either acutely or more insidiously and persists over a long period of time.

Across the psychological literature the work is used to include at least two, and probably more than two, psychological states which look rather different phenomenologically and which—it is hypothesized—arise from different levels of development. Harry Guntrip<sup>8</sup> delineates this clearly when he talks of 'classical' depression and a state of meaninglessness and futility. According to his thought, the first arises in the context of *loss*, and it is thought that it is the denial and suppression of *anger* at the loss and a fear that hate and anger—if felt and expressed—will destroy all that is loving and good that give rise to the turning of all these feelings on the self which we then experience as 'depression'. Its best 'normal' prototype is perhaps bereavement: a person or persons or even an ideal is irrecoverably lost, and the necessary mourning must go through phases of numbness, shock and then acceptance of loss (as against denial of it) and anger (as against passive helplessness) in order that the good in that which is lost can be recovered in our internal memory and life allowed to continue and recover its vitality. In this sense depression arises when mourning does not start or gets stuck and makes for an identification with death rather than life.

According to the thought of Melanie Klein<sup>9</sup> something of this 'depressive' experience is universal to all of us, quite apart from any actual traumatic losses we suffer. Within the first year of development we 'lose' our primitive internal world in which we can separate and keep apart the extremes of 'good' and 'bad', love and hate, to inhabit a world where we find we hate what we also love. This is usually worked out initially on mother whom we now perceive as being responsible both for caring for us and meeting our needs *and* for periodically leaving and abandoning us. In this experience, disturbing mixtures of love, anger, destructive and reparative feelings all have their part and it is the failure to negotiate this 'cauldron' that can leave us feeling stuck in helplessness or fear of destructiveness—the raw material for later vulnerability to depression.

However Guntrip—drawing upon Fairbairn and Winnicott<sup>10</sup>—also describes another feeling which he says is often mistaken for classical depression—something very much more like an experience of meaninglessness and futility, often existing in those who function apparently effectively on the outside and yet who feel empty, false and unreal at the level of their deepest being. This, he posits, is due less to our being engaged with disturbing experiences of loss or with the containing of strong conflicting feelings, and more to the inhibition of desire, wanting and even hope *plus* the consequent protection of ourselves against their emergence because they are themselves felt to be potentially too dangerous and disturbing. The resulting sense of isolation and meaninglessness is not unlike the experience of inner apathy or *accidie* which spiritual writers have described. This state of affairs comes, it is thought, from difficulty at an even earlier period in our lives than that which gives rise to the conflict-laden context of more classical depression.

But in both developmental stages affectivity *and* sexuality are involved and cannot in fact be separated. In infant and childhood sexuality it is impossible to distinguish sensations and feelings involving the whole body from those pertaining more explicitly to the sexual organs. In a perfect development, general affectivity and explicit sexual feelings would develop in an integrated way, but for most of us it does not happen as smoothly as that. So in later life we meet all the variations: inhibition of both affectivity and adult sexuality, or apparent ease in the sexual sphere with concurrent difficulty in affective relationships to the point where they can seem to be quite divorced from each other. For others sexual

activity becomes the channel to assuage personal loneliness, though the failure of many marriages indicates that this is by no means a foolproof method. Yet others can make affective relationships provided intimate sexual use of the body is *not* involved.

This inevitably simplistic psychological account does, I feel, show one point clearly, namely the dangers inherent in making, in later life, a sharp division between the affective and genital aspects of sexuality. In human development the two have a common source and have a *potential* to help each other. This calls in question the viability of celibates trying to develop one and not the other, for we run the risk of repeating the pattern and meeting the same sticking points that we actually met in our earlier attempts to grow into a *whole* person and self.

This point is well illustrated in Susan Howatch's novel, *Glamorous powers*,<sup>11</sup> depicting life in the Church of England of the 1940s. The book, the second of a trilogy, shows vividly the dilemma of an ex-monk when the sexual urge and drive are separated from more general emotional problems concerning a sense of self and relationship. He marries, at least partly to fulfil genital sexual desire and to avoid sexual sin, but in this relationship is then confronted by deeper disturbance due to unresolved problems related to his whole emotional life and his childhood experience. His story shows how spirituality and actual life choices which focus on the genital drive and on subduing 'the lusts of the flesh' can temporarily obscure underlying and more all-pervasive psychological issues. But these will remain unresolved and, as it were, poised to clamour anew for attention.

It is against this background that we can now undertake a more specific exploration.

#### *The relationship between celibacy and depression*

It seems to me that there may well be a link between the practice of celibacy and the human experiences and psychological states covered by the word depression.

First, in so far as one type of depression derives from an experience of isolation, withdrawal and probably the failure of the one essential person in an earlier environment to adapt enough to our needs for us to form the sort of secure and loving relationship that will allow us to go out and meet the bigger world and other people with confidence, those espousing celibacy with this sort of vulnerability can reactivate this early failure situation. They have

to approach universal loving without the personal emotional equipment to do so. Paradoxically, it may be because deep down they fear that a relationship with another person will also be a failure that they have attempted as it were to 'go it alone'.

To the extent that we had difficulties at this early stage we may shun an intimate human relationship *and* opt for that expression of the celibate life that does not/cannot be very related to others. We simply cannot achieve that 'binding to people' that the spiritual writers extol. So we can become inwardly isolated with a sense of inner deadness and futility which we may experience and describe as chronic depression. Even for those of us with more fortunate childhood experience the ideal to live alone is nevertheless likely to expose us to any 'chinks' in the earlier pattern.

This comes out as a failure in affectivity; for some the impasse might be healed through the experience of sexuality, but that avenue may have never really been a thoroughfare and anyway is now closed off. Or it can be there but operate in dissociation from the rest of us as when celibates' sexual desire goes, as it were, underground or, alternatively, suddenly emerges in uncharacteristic, perverse or even scandalous sexual fantasy or behaviour. These usually engender a deep sense of guilt and low self-esteem which then exacerbate the condition. So a person can swing internally from a sense of meaninglessness and futility to some sort of partial and painful aliveness. The overall picture, however, is of someone who is not able to function as an integrated whole.

It is my impression that this sort of depression—experienced either as deadness, or as a meaningless and isolated half-aliveness—is more likely to be found in those people whose sexuality was not fully or indeed ever roused before they espoused the celibate life, though I do not want to categorize too exactly or rigidly. Into this group would come the 'bachelors and spinsters' and those who enter on their vocation and ministry at a very early age at a stage of less than mature emotional and affective development. Furthermore, the affective incapacity in some of these people may well have unconsciously influenced what purported on the surface to be a free choice to offer themselves to the celibate life. This very lack of consciousness makes for difficulties later on, either because the person remains unconscious and so cut off from a source of energy and vitality, or because the full internal state of affairs erupts, painfully, into consciousness.

But the celibate life can also be associated with the more classical type of depression in which loss, disillusion, anger and hate are all implicated. Such can be the predicament of those who cannot face, bear and mourn the losses inherent in the celibate life: the loss of a particular relationship with another person or of a particular kind of functioning and pleasure. Again at the risk of over-generalizing, it may be that this sort of depression may arise more easily in those who *are* aware of their sexuality and therefore of what they are losing. It may become acute at particular times such as the menopause for women when the loss of the potential for motherhood becomes irrevocably final, or with the threat of impotence or decline in men.

Depression comes not through the pain of the loss itself but to the extent to which the loss arouses disillusion and anger *which cannot be acknowledged* and which have to be *denied*. A particular person, scarred and frightened by experiences of loss perhaps way back in his or her personal past, may involuntarily tend to defend himself or herself against the re-emergence of the feelings associated with that experience by denying them and keeping them well out of awareness. And we can then become 'dug-in' to this psychologically unsatisfactory situation by some of the *spirituality* we have already examined. If much spiritual emphasis is placed on the *ideal and charism* of celibacy then it becomes harder to acknowledge feelings and pain on the human level if the promised gifts and fulfilment do not seem to be given. The anger and disillusion at this can live only underground and turned against the self. Similarly, hate can arise at the teaching or Church which demands this renunciation as a pre-condition of vocation, and if the person cannot integrate this hate with the love for God and Church that inspired the sacrifice then a sense of helplessness and, ultimately, depression are likely to be the result. Celibacy *does* involve a loss which needs to be mourned, but this process sometimes cannot be resolved or even allowed to start. It is under these circumstances that sublimation, or the creative re-channelling of the sexual drive and energy into prayer or apostolic works, is likely to fail, for sublimation requires not only the 'grace' of vocation but also motivation—often present—and the emotional ability to integrate conflicting feelings—not invariably present.

There seems, therefore, good reason to *link* celibacy and depression, but the question remains as to whether this is an

*associative* or a *causal* link. Does celibacy 'cause' depression or are they just likely to coexist?

It is my thesis that it is failures in the development of a sense of self and in the capacity to make and sustain intimate relationships which give rise to the 'meaningless' sort of depression, and that it is the inability to integrate conflicting feelings arising in the context of actual or threatened loss which results in depression of the more 'classical' kind. Both situations also tend to lower self-esteem thus exacerbating the depression. But none of these difficulties is the exclusive property of the celibate life *per se*. The same deficits and conflicts would cause depression in those who are not celibate.

But the capacity to live alone creatively makes strong demands on our psychological maturity in perhaps just these areas of our sense of self and relatedness and our ability to hold within ourselves strong and conflicting feelings. So the practice of celibacy tests to an extreme our inner resources, and assaults and exploits our emotional vulnerabilities. Difficulties with celibacy, therefore, can very easily become the 'symptom'—that is the most available vehicle—for the expression of more general psychological deficits and conflicts; these, for celibates, can become *encapsulated* in that choice and dimension of life. It follows, I think, that to treat or alleviate only the 'symptom' will not make the underlying difficulty go away.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Winnicott, Donald W.: *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment* (London, Karnac Books and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1990—first published 1965); Fairbairn, Ronald: *Psychoanalytic studies of the personality* (London, Tavistock, 1952); Guntrip, Harry: *Schizoid phenomena, object relations and the self* (London, Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1986—first published 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Dalrymple, John in Campbell, Alistair V. (ed): *Dictionary of pastoral care* (London, SPCK, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Georgen, D.: *The sexual celibate* (London, SPCK, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> Gallacher, Charles A. and Vandenberg, Thomas L.: *The celibacy myth—loving for life* (St Paul Publications, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Kraft, William: *Sexual dimensions of the celibate life* (Gill and McMillan, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Gallacher and Vandenberg: *op. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Maslow, Abraham H.: *Motivation and personality* (Harper and Row, 1954), esp. chs 4-7, 11-12).

<sup>8</sup> Guntrip, Harry: *op. cit.* esp. pp 24-7 and ch 5.

<sup>9</sup> Klein, Melanie: esp. 'A contribution to the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states', *International journal of psychoanalysis*, vol 16 (1935), pp 145-74.

<sup>10</sup> Guntrip, Harry: *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Howatch, Susan: *Glamorous powers* (London, Fontana/Collins, 1988).