

The Erotic and the Sacred

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Over the last few months the world has been faced with the fact that children have been sexually abused by Catholic priests over many years and that the institution of the church has not only known about this but enabled priests to continue their sordid behavior by paying money to parishioners to keep quiet and reassigning guilty priests to churches without alerting potential victims. When the story first hit the news, the American Cardinals met with the Pope. Reporting on this meeting, Bishop Wilton Gregory told the press “This is an ongoing struggle. It is most importantly a struggle to make sure the Catholic priesthood is not dominated by homosexual men.” This is obviously a diversion designed to avoid an authentic discussion of sexual morality, celibacy, women priests, or homosexuality. Homosexuals are no more likely to be pedophiles than heterosexuals.

The church is resisting real change by denying that celibacy is an issue. “Today’s church leaders see sex as primarily as an act fraught with moral danger, not as a relationship, imbued with moral good. How could they think otherwise? They have never known sexual relations—only sexual fantasy, masturbation and struggle.”¹

At the heart of this problem is the deeply ingrained belief that sexuality and spirituality are mutually exclusive. The individual who wants to be pure, to be a vessel for the divine, and at the same time believes that his erotic nature is evil, will attempt to repress a natural aspect of himself with disastrous results. As Audre Lorde points out, referring to the split between the sexual and the spiritual, this is not a matter of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.

.... we have attempted to separate the spiritual and the erotic, thereby reducing the spiritual to a world of flattened affect, a world of the ascetic who aspires to feel nothing. But nothing is farther from the truth. For the ascetic position is one of the highest fears, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not of self-discipline but of self-abnegation.²

In Jungian terms, the individual who believes that sexuality is an “intrinsic evil” will deny his sexual nature altogether, refusing to allow it into consciousness, relegating it to the shadow and his unconscious. This is a prescription for disaster. The unconscious

shadow, when ignored, takes on a life of its own apart from consciousness. It will become autonomous and break through into consciousness, creating thoughts and acts shocking even to the individual himself who feels he has no control of his sexuality and hence renews his efforts to repress it making the problem worse.

The solution is not to let priests marry, although this sounds like a fine idea, nor to scapegoat homosexual priests. A real solution requires dealing with the fact that sexuality and spirituality are two aspects of every human being and then coming to an understanding of the relationship between them. When sexuality is cut off from spiritual life the result is an increase in the oppression and violence against women, children, and nature.

There are a variety of views of sexuality in every culture and religion. Most Goddess cultures, for example, see deep connections between sex and the sacred. And even though Christianity has been a major contributor to the alienation of sexuality from spirituality, there are some Christian theologians who have also expressed deeply relational views of body and soul. Eastern religious traditions may reject the radical dichotomies of sexuality and spirituality, seeing them as part of the play of opposites, but some of their doctrines promote hierarchies of spirit over nature, mind over body, and man over woman, reinforcing the polarity of sexuality and spirituality.

Christian doctrine tends to present sexuality as a temptation generated by the body (and the powers of evil) toward the corruption and destruction of the soul (and humanity's obedience to God). In *Adam, Eve, and The Serpent*, Elaine Pagels describes the enormous influence of the Genesis creation story on Western Culture. The story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent was written down by members of Hebrew tribes about three thousand years ago, and probably told for generations before that. This story became, for Jews, and later for Christians and Muslims, a primary means for revealing and defending basic attitudes and values which emphasize both the alienation of humanity from God and the dangers of female sexuality.³ "Augustine derived many of these attitudes from the story of Adam and Eve: that sexual desire is sinful; that infants are infected from the moment of conception with the disease of original sin; and that Adam's sin corrupted the whole of nature itself. Even those who think of Genesis only as literature, and those who are not Christian, live in a culture indelibly shaped by such interpretations as these."⁴

Augustine was very disturbed about the power of lust to overwhelm the will. Describing his struggle to be chaste, Augustine recalls how, “in the sixteenth year of the age of my flesh...the madness of raging lust exercised its supreme dominion over me.”⁵ Augustine felt powerless and described himself as a victim, through his sexual desire, he says, “my invisible enemy trod me down and seduced me,”⁶

Augustine associates lust with sinful, uncontrollable, craving—the inability to control the body. What epitomizes our rebellion against God, above all, is the “rebellion in the flesh”—a spontaneous uprising in the “disobedient members”:

After Adam and Eve disobeyed...they felt for the first time a movement of disobedience in their flesh, as punishment in kind for their own disobedience to God.... The soul, which had taken a perverse delight in its own liberty and distained to serve God, was now deprived of its original mastery over the body.⁷

Augustine believed that as originally created, Adam and Eve had mental mastery over the procreative process and were following God’s commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Ever since the rebellion in Eden, however, spontaneous sexual arousal is, Augustine contends, the clearest evidence of the effect of original sin. Augustine’s own experience convinced him that such arousal functions independently of the will’s rightful rule: “Because of this, these members are rightly called *pudenda* [parts of shame] because they excite themselves just as they like, in opposition to the mind which is their master, as if they were their own masters.”⁸ The capacity to procreate without uncontrollable desire is forever lost, according to Augustine, because of the rebellion in the Garden. The power of the erotic, always carrying us beyond the realm of will and reason, threatens our very souls.

Augustine’s view of sexuality, based on his own sexual and psychological immaturity, is the basis for the vows taken by Catholic priests today and is largely responsible for the fact that sexuality is the central taboo in Western monotheism. Sexuality is the principle paradigm for that which is out of control and thus incompatible with a spirituality that insists that reason and the mind dominate desire and the body. Such a view denies that it is possible to incorporate sexuality into spiritual life. Fortunately, not all theologians agree with Augustine. Dorothee Soelle, for example, writes:

Both religion and sexuality heal the split between ourselves and the universe. We discover that we are indeed “part of everything” and one with the mystery of life. To talk about God in relation to our sexuality means to be aware of love moving in us, for “in God we live and move and have our being.”⁹

According to Carl Jung, the conflict between ethics and sex today is not just a conflict between our instinctual nature and moral attitudes but it is a struggle “to give an instinct its rightful place in our lives, and to recognize in this instinct a power which seeks expression and evidently may not be trifled with, and therefore cannot be made to fit in with our well-meaning moral laws.”¹⁰ Jung further states that sexuality is not “mere instinctuality;” it is an indisputably creative power that is not only the basic cause of our individual lives, but a very serious factor in our psyche, that is soul, life as well.¹¹

For Augustine and I suspect for most modern day Catholic priests, the world is divided up into good and evil with sexuality and spirituality forever condemned to be on opposing sides. It is not just priests who must choose; many people feel some conflict between their felt sexuality and the doctrines of religious institutions. Many lesbians and gay men, for example, either repress their sexuality in order to stay in the church or leave the church in order to be true to their sexual identity.

Some theologians, in an attempt to resolve this problem, refuse to accept the identity of lust and sin put forward by Augustine and accepted as dogma by much of Christendom. Carter Heyward has an interesting twist on Augustine’s position that the inability to control our sexual desires is sin. She turns Augustine inside out: sin is the violation of the sacred bond between sexuality and the sacred, it is the failure to achieve right relationship and is bound to result in sexual violence and/or global domination and subjugation.¹²

The erotic is our most fully embodied experience of the love of God. As such, it is the source of our capacity for transcendence, the “crossing over” among ourselves, making connections between ourselves in relation. The erotic is the divine Spirit’s yearning, through our bodyselves, toward mutually empowering relation, which is our most fully embodied experience of God as love.¹³

Whereas Augustine’s arguments that mind must control body are based on his own experience of helplessness, Heyward turns to her experience of love and

felt connections. Heyward goes beneath the physical expression of lust to the esoteric meaning of sexuality and finds there a deep and abiding presence of the sacred. It does not surprise me that women, (in this case a lesbian), theologians proclaim the sacredness of sex. Sexuality, along with birth, death, intuition, healing, and play, is a women's mystery.

To speak of sexuality as a "Women's Mystery," does not mean that women have a secret that we refuse to tell, but that our truths are grounded in experiences that can't be fully or adequately expressed. It is not that women and sexuality are impossible to understand but the understanding can only come about by certain changes in our ways of thinking and being in the world. Within the discourse used to express modern Western thought, women, children, and nature are often rendered obscure and enigmatic, on the one hand, and trivialized and demeaned, on the other.

Women's mysteries are not something that need solving, like a murder mystery, but are something to enter into. Just as a rational argument for the identity of lust and sin has contributed to confusion and even sexual perversion on the part of some, the attempt to solve the mysteries of birth and sexuality within the scientific rational paradigm, have led to cloning, invitrofertilization, millions of starving, unwanted children, and desperate women often willing to end their pregnancies or kill their children.

Women's mysteries are a revelation of the divine spark of women's wisdom hidden within each of us. Although men may awaken to inner wisdom, or Sophia, it is women who must point the way and maintain the mysteries. All mysteries are women's. Men's mysteries are women—what does man find mysterious? Woman and Nature. These mysteries cannot be penetrated with man's highly developed and very remarkable "logic-mind." Reason alone is impotent in the face of women's mysteries.

In order to enter into women's mysteries, we must develop a mode of knowing that allows us to access the hidden without interrupting its hiddenness. We must go into the mystery, the hidden and concealed realms, without disturbing what is there. This requires a preparation on the part of ego consciousness. In the time of the Great Goddess the rites and rituals enacted at places like Eleusis and Ephesus often included ritualized sexuality and prepared participations for the experience and understanding of women's

mysteries. Although the curriculum has changed, this is the purpose of a Mystery School or Wisdom School today—opening the student to the inner wisdom of Sophia.

Since the worldview dominant in most parts of the world today values rational, linear, dualistic, subject-object thinking, most schools train us to think in these ways exclusively. When we study subjects like birth, death, or sexuality, we are presented with biological facts, scientifically gathered data, and the objective and well considered opinions of experts. Everything becomes an object of study, the investigator of the mystery of birth may be a mother but in her research paper she is at a distance from the mystery. However, in the lived bodily experience of giving birth she has another perspective, she is not standing back from what is happening, she gives birth. Out of the depths of her womb she releases a living being. Within the mystery of the experience, this is a sacred, albeit messy, activity.

Objective descriptions of sex don't capture the mysteries of the lived and sacred dimensions of human sexual experiences and neither does pornography. Couples are encouraged to buy and read sex manuals which depict the many positions of the sexual act but which totally leave out any sense of the mystery of the erotic. And pornography, which "excises all love for the profit of lust, daily endanger women, children, and men the world over."¹⁴ Sexuality in the sense of a sacred mystery is outside the realm pornography or sexual techniques; Pornography represents the suppression of true feeling. It emphasizes sensation and emotion devoid of feelings of love and connection.

The word *mystery* is derived from the Greek *myein* meaning to close (used of the eyes and lips).¹⁵ Mysteries and *mysticism* share a common root related to things hidden, things that cannot be seen or spoken. This points to the necessity of looking inward and the essential value of silence in entering mysteries. The kind of silence experienced in women's mysteries is like that one encounters in the presence of something overwhelming -- one is silenced by the magnitude of the experience. It is mysterious because it is ineffable – there are simply no words to explain it.

I have experienced this in the face of the mystery of death. For about nine months I helped care for Robin who was dying of cancer. I massaged her, we talked, and I helped with her physical care. Often we sat in silence. The closer she came to dying the more I became aware of what I referred to in my journal as a "pure erotic love energy" when I

was with her. It was an impersonal force that seemed to saturate the room. At first I didn't say anything about this to Robin. I thought it was my awe at the way she was living into her dying and although we talked about the dying process and the meaning of life a lot, I didn't mention my experience of this almost palpable force. Then one day, when I was doing Therapeutic Touch with her, Robin said, "do you feel the Love of God surrounding us?" After that we shared this mystery in her mundane sickroom. If someone had looked in they would have seen us doing quite ordinary things, changing the bed, me massaging her, us talking, or just sitting in silence; but there was something else there all the while. It is in women's sharing of our feelings and experiences that we participate in the mysteries. As Robin realized, there is a part of us that is seldom revealed at all during the course of our lives. One day she said to me, "It looks like I was born, raised up, had my family and my career, and now I'm dying. All that is true. But there was someone else inside me all the while who never got to speak."

Experiences that cannot be shared because it is impossible to articulate them in the language and categories available in the dominant worldview are generally undervalued. "Such a world creates psychic havoc for people who have given the greater part of their lives to woman's work – bearing children, caring for the living, and tending the dying. They are made to question their intrinsic worth because they haven't any words to convey the essence of primary experience."¹⁶

It is the ineffableness of the experience that takes us into the mystery and those realms hidden or unavailable to discursive thought. It is the quality of the experience that Robin and I had that opened a door, not the content of the experience. We cannot reduce such an experience to something that could be understood analytically without destroying the mystery. The mystery arises when we suspend analytic reductionistic thought and enter into the Silence. Silence (*Sige*) is the primordial female power according to a Gnostic creation myth and Wisdom (*Sophia*) was born out of her.¹⁷ Silence precedes and gives birth to wisdom. Women's wisdom requires suspending the constant chatter of "logic-mind" and making a clearing for the hidden truth of our experience to appear.

Judy Grahn gives us an example women's mystery of sexuality in her description of what she calls "psychic sex"—a form of lovemaking that takes the lovers into the domain of higher consciousness, creativity, and insight:

There are times, when at the moment I touch my tongue to her clitoris, my whole mind ‘sees’ a blue light around the precious organ, and as my tongue folds around it, I seem to be licking a living yellow/red light, some essential stone-like flame with a blue light around it. I know I am entranced at those times, gone into another dimension, as she is, and our flesh is more than material, our lovemaking is more than love and more than sexual. The silver rays connecting between us fill me with strength, confidence, affirmation, joy, and some esthetic quality of beauty that is like another way of seeing, like being in another place.”¹⁸

In Hindu philosophy this fire, described by Grahn, is called *kundalini* when it is within us, Shakti when it is the female creative force of the universe, a force without which the creation god Shiva, can do nothing. Shakti’s role is similar to Sophia’s in the Western tradition.

The blue light of the *aura clitoris* is the essential female creative power, the emanating rays of life-giving force, the fire that lives at the heart of the female experience. The Great Goddess is sometimes represented with rays emanating from her vulva onto the earth with its plants and animals and onto the upturned faces of humankind, who looked to the aura for inspiration and life. The female sky god, Nut, of ancient Egypt is depicted leaning her dark body over the earth, allowing the rays to emanate from her vulva and breasts onto the happy earth below.¹⁹

It was this sexual-creative force the ancient women used to contact, understand, and form contracts with material fire, as well as with the energies of mineral and plant and animal life. It was known to be the creative bond between humans and each other and all other living things.

The “sex drive” has been traditionally defined and limited to a biological urge designed to perpetuate the species and the individual ancestral line. However, the neuropsychologist, James Prescott believes that the primary function of female sexuality is affectual bonding.

The sexual receptivity of most female mammals is under ovarian control: its primary function is reproduction. But the human female has undergone an evolutionary change. Here sexual receptivity is not bound by ovarian cycles. Its primary function is not reproduction but the development and maintenance of affectual bonding. No such evolutionary changes seem have taken place in males.²⁰

Prescott sees a link between religious experience and female sexuality. He explains subjective experiences such as the one described above by Judy Grahn, in terms of neurology. He says that there are unique connections between the female forebrain and cerebellum which may account for the fact that some women experience orgasm so intensely that they enter altered states of consciousness similar to religious experiences. Lacking the neurological capability to integrate pleasure into the neocortex, or higher brain center, however, males cannot reach the same transcendent heights, says Prescott. Their sexual pleasure is largely reflexive.

This dramatic shift in the function of sexuality, according to Prescott, will ultimately lead toward the integration of the conscious and unconscious mind and to a more profound understanding of the spiritual nature of the species. “The female plays an absolutely essential role in this process because evolution gave her the neurobiological advantage. The male will sort of tag along.”²¹

When I visited Tahiti I learned that the natives there participate in a free exchange of sex in order to obtain what they call “manna”—the sacred life energy. They share food for the same reasons and all children are seen as products of the manna of the gods. Although many children are born “outside of wedlock,” there are no orphans in Tahiti—they are all treasured and shared between families.

The erotic is the key to the connection between sexuality and spirituality. The erotic is “the drive toward union with what we belong to—union with our own possibilities, union with significant other persons in our world in relation to whom we discover our own self-fulfillment.”²² The erotic is a source of our awareness of and longing for the interconnectedness with all things. And at the most fundamental level, the erotic connects us to the sacred.²³

“The erotic is a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.”²⁴ The erotic “rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge,” and “offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough.”²⁵

Audre Lorde speaks of erotic power as “an assertion of the life-force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now

reclaiming in one language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives.”²⁶ She associates the erotic with wisdom, “the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” and, again, with creativity: “There is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.”²⁷

This is a description of sacred power of the life-force, creative energy, and Sophia, nursemaid of wisdom which is available to us at all times in the hidden dimensions of our being. We need only allow its presence. But we have been raised to fear the presence of the sacred within ourselves.

We have been raised to fear the *yes* within ourselves, our deepest cravings. . . . The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression as women.²⁸

When we learn to say “yes” to the sacred erotic power within, our lives are transformed. “Once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.”²⁹

Those of us who have entered into the mystery in our own relationships and experienced the erotic as sacred, are learning to recognize ourselves and each other, not as souls trapped in bodies, but as soul-infused-beings. We are learning to feel at ease in our bodyselves—sensual, connected, and empowered. We are becoming resources of wisdom for each other and we imagine ourselves sharing in the creation of a new world in which the rape of children and women by “men of God” is impossible.

Notes

¹ Andrew Sullivan, “They Know Not What They Do,” *Time Magazine*, May 6, 2002, 31.

² Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” *Sister Outsider*, (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984) 56.

³ Elaine Pagels. *Adam, Eve, and The Serpent*. (New York: Random House, 1988), xix.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Augustine, *Confessions*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 69, quoted in Elaine Pagels, *Adam, Eve, and The Serpent*. (New York: Random House, 1988), 69.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Augustine. *The City of God, 13,13*, quoted in Elaine Pagels. *Adam, Eve, and The Serpent*. (New York: Random House, 1988), 110.

- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Dorothee Soelle. *Beyond Mere Obedience*. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), 63.
- ¹⁰ Carl Jung. *Psychological Reflections*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) 104.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Carter Heyward. *Touching Our Strength*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 90.
- ¹³ Ibid., 99.
- ¹⁴ Caitlin Matthews. *Sophia Goddess of Wisdom*. (London: The Aquarian Press, 1992), 54.
- ¹⁵ Nor Hall. *The Moon and The Virgin*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 59.
- ¹⁶ Nor Hall. *The Moon and The Virgin*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 59.
- ¹⁷ Barbara Walker. *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 951.
- ¹⁸ Judy Grahn. *Another Mother Tongue*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 240.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 241.
- ²⁰ Mary Long. "Visions of a New Faith," *Science Digest*, November, 1981, 42.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Rollo May. *Love and Will*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 74.
- ²³ Carter Heyward. *Touching Our Strength*. (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 91.
- ²⁴ Audre Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider*. (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984) 53.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 54.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 56.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Audre Lorde. "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," *Sister Outsider*. (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 57-58
- ²⁹ Ibid., 57.

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