

RELIGION AND SEXUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: OR LISTENING BETWEEN THE BEDPOSTS

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"Words, words, words. I'm so sick of words" cries a despairing Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*. "Is that all you blighters can do?" In matters of sexuality as in matters of parenthood and religion it's action that counts, not words. And so I want to begin my talk with a warning about those who theorize either about religion or about sexuality and certainly those who speculate about both; be suspicious! Our words are always imperfect attempts to shape, define, describe, prescribe, confirm, celebrate, condemn what is primarily a total experience of being and doing, of 'acting.'

Why then do we talk at all? Why not just *be, do*, get on with it? We talk perhaps initially because we have begun to realize how thought, principles, ideas and words have *already* shaped, defined and limited what our bodily experience and self expression is allowed to be. From our babyhood religious and cultural values have overtly and covertly shaped the range and quality of physical experiences that seem possible for us.

Those of us interested in the relation between religion and sexuality are indeed "working something out" that has intense personal interest. How was it that my own particular religious background affected and continues to influence my personal experience and expression of sexuality? That will be a life-long inquiry. The subjectivity of the position of each explorer into questions concerning sexuality should not frighten us too much, unless we suppose that theologians or sexologists are creatures of reason alone. Such is not the case however: disagreements among theologians are not so much an issue of reason or fact but much more one of fundamental presuppositions. Knowledge is in the best of western intellectual tradition, not purely a matter of detachment and logic, but a matter of passionate reason, the wedding of the head and the heart into a unified act of subjectivity with objectivity.

I propose, therefore, that we approach the topic of sexuality boldly, acknowledging our own biases and presuppositions in matters sexual as well as religious, and seeking illumination and further un-

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derstanding and not merely rationalization of our personal predelections.

I want to begin by reflecting on two recent books that are indicative of contemporary sexual mores: *The Hite Report* on female sexuality and Gail Sheehy's *Passages*.¹

What I find indicative about the public attention to the *Hite Report* as well as to *Passages* is that it shows a great thirst for the need for confirmation. Too long theologians and sex experts tell us what *should* be—here other people tell us what *is*. The effect of these printed self-revelations and descriptions is fundamentally therapeutic. "Oh, me too; I'm so relieved. It means I'm normal. You know that's exactly how I feel, I've never been able to express that thought before." These books are fundamentally descriptions of the experiences and feeling not of the experts, the sexual or religious athletes, or coaches, but of ordinary people, both men and women, who have been afraid to describe and acknowledge their own feelings and bodily experiences. The books act for the reader as a catharsis, an invitation to self-acceptance and the beginning of self-expression about matters so often barely felt at the level of conscious awareness. Of course the *Hite Report* really does not go far enough. Neither does *Passages*. Even in the choice of questions a very definite and limited view of female sexuality is presupposed. How about all those other aspects of female sexuality that go beyond masturbation and intercourse and orgasm? What about menstruation, pregnancy, abortion, miscarriage, infertility, birth, lactation, menopause, the sexuality of the aged? Perhaps we have just begun on this odyssey of description.

There is now a need and desire for attention to *describing* the full range of human sexual experience, particularly in the case of women who have been the silent majority on this issue.

There is a new searching for a sense of pattern and purpose in the successive phases of personal development. The popularity of Erikson's and Jung's ideas of *life stages* today and the immense success of *Passages* might be seen as part of a spiritual quest of modern society, a search for an ascent towards meaning and personal maturity rather than the fear of a descent towards death. There is a new view of the self—an evolutionary one, that must search for an inner logic to the process not identical with aging. Erikson's and Jung's views of the process of life as involving a spiritual dimension are more profound than any perspective offered by Sheehy.

Dare we suggest that the ongoing search that men and women

¹Shere Hite, *The Hite Report* (New York: Dell, 1977) and Gail Sheehy, *Passages* (New York: Bantam Books, 1977).

alike have in our culture to *know* their own experience, to *accept* their own experience and to enrich their own experience of sexuality in all its dimension is *also* a spiritual quest?

In fashion with some other theologians in the contemporary period I will make bold to define "spirit" as a process of "freeing." Wind, blowing, sometimes moves, I feel it coming, a rustle, refreshment, new, a wow, hey, it's happening. I never felt that before. Oh my gosh, it's too strong, I'm going to burst open. Oh no, Oh *yes*.

Spirit frees, tears down/builds up, renews, gives life, peace. You might think the language I was using suggested an orgasm or the birth of a child; maybe it did. Yes it did. In fact I think our best religious language, imagery and symbols is sexually based. Did you hear me say that? Yes! I did. I'll say it again. The most significant religious images, symbols are based on the totality of human bodily and sexual experience. What makes me angry is that the Christian Church has by and large forgotten the origin of its imagery especially in its female connotations.

Can one truthfully say that the attempts of many individuals to free themselves from destructive sexual ideas and sexual roles, men and women, individuals and couples, married and single, is the work of the *Holy Spirit*? I suppose it comes back to a definition of the term 'peace'. If the spirit brings peace and love, we are speaking on the level of bodily and reflective experience, of a condition of *harmony*. Harmony is not inertia, nonactivity, it is a creative rather than a dulling experience, a balancing of all factors in interplay and interaction. Too much tension leads to chaos, too much stasis to inertia and boredom. Harmony is not boredom.

Religious people are fond of talking of sins of the mind, such as pride, jealousy, hate and sins of the body such as lust, greed, envy, etc., as if they had no relation to each other. As we are now becoming ever more aware, a sin of the mind, a disorder of the mind is a disorder of the body. *Stress* as Dr. Selye's book² indicates is a *total response*, not merely a response of our consciousness. A sin against the Holy Spirit, that is an act of impiety, a lack of love, trust, whatever, is also an act of violence against one's own body. Never is this more clear than those suicide attempts that express a total lack of trust to others and are at the same time an attack on the body. The Christian tradition has lived too long with a dichotomy between soul and body and has seen these as two separate realities. The effects of this framework on the experience of sexuality is evident in religious and secular approach alike.

²Hans Selye, *Stress Without Distress* (New York: Lippincott, 1974).

A disharmony in bodily experience is a disharmony of the "soul." We know our mental state affects body experience—so, too, body experience affects our "mental state." The search for description, pattern and purpose in sexual experience and personal development is fundamental to a personal process of liberation from ideas, false ideologies, values and roles that harm the body and thus the "soul." Some of these ideologies and values are the most cherished ideals of our own culture and of our western religion.

A process of liberation from destructive ideals both secular and traditionally religious about sexuality and sex roles, means perhaps at root a recovery of self-trust and self-acceptance. It is the *whole* of the body experience in the full range of its sexual possibilities that need affirmation. We are learning more about how limited an understanding of sexuality we have in our society. Self-respect and self-trust are indeed at bottom Christian values, too often obscured. If the body is the temple of the "soul," then the body is our greatest responsibility. Christianity has unfortunately more often reflected the Greek saying that the body was the tomb of the soul. Being free begins at home, in the *body politic* and this means the home relationships. The intimate relationships, the ones we can influence and affect are indeed the beginning of all revolutions. Freeing of oneself in one's relationships to parents, children, lovers, brothers and sisters, (all indeed are sexual relationships in the broadest sense) is perhaps the most ultimate of political liberations and of psychological and spiritual health. These are the many aspects of my extended body experience—my sexual self that mark me as at peace or at war in myself, as torn asunder by hidden and half-conscious emotions, wishes, feelings and desires, or filled with regret, doubt and with a sense of missed opportunity.

Perhaps one of the most fundamental of all personal revolutions is the stage of life when a person's religious authority and training comes into conflict with one's own sexual self and one's sexual desires and hopes. Very often it is the religious authority that loses out on the level of formal allegiance. It is a mature act to be able to say to oneself—whether at 18, or at 30 or at 45—"inspite of the fact that I have learned that this is a 'sin', I choose this course of action as right for me." This struggle of decision-making is one of the highest importance on a spiritual level. The act of breaking with parental values, cultural values or traditional religious values is an act not only of negation but of affirmation for oneself. There can be no affirmation of the self sexually until the religious values of good and bad, right and wrong, images of male and female, one's roles and ideas of the

meaning of marriage and the family have been confronted, and negotiated. The images of the "good wife" as reinforced by Jewish and Christian tradition, or the nature of male and female relationships, one active, the other passive, these can destroy the individuals trying to live by those norms.

The liberation of the self is however, not something that can be finally accomplished by bold act of rebellion. Those who break the bonds of inner or outer restriction, to masturbate, leave the church to get married, to get divorced, come out of the closet, make love for the first time, have only begun the process of liberation. Anyone raised in a religious tradition will have the need to begin a lengthy process of self-encounter to discover the unconscious forces at work that shape our reactions, feelings, presuppositions and thought. As long as these feelings and the sexual attitudes they give rise to, are determined by unconscious and unknown forces, I am not the mistress of my own soul. When I wish I didn't react like this, or feel that way, when I try to make myself become someone else, when I try to improve, apologize for, wish, oh, wish for something other to be, chastize my mate for being what he is,—then I have no peace, no harmony, no self-forgiveness, no self-trust. I am neither liberated in my body, nor in my soul. When I cannot be open, 'be myself' in my relationship to my parents, I know I am not free in my other relationships.

The act of spiritual renewal is therefore more than a throwing off of conscious ideas; it involves facing those unconscious fears and feelings and images about ourselves as sexual beings. It takes a long time. The first stage begins with description, a telling, to oneself and to others of the hidden feelings and fears.

Why bother? The pain and the risk and the emotional cost of doing this may seem more trouble than it is worth. I suppose the first answer is that it is a terrible feeling not to own your own soul. This inner conflict, produces compulsive actions, moods, depression, a sense of *disease* in oneself and therefore with others. We live in a twilight zone of elation and depression, with little hope. I know of a young woman who challenged a father's religious authority by violating his sexual standards, but who struggles daily with issues of sexuality, vocation, self-doubt, relationships. I know of priests who have left the priesthood, who are now married and wrestle still with the unconscious powers and influence of religious values and ideals on them. All of us struggle with our parental and religious background. We *must* continue. I know of married couples who never break through to a sharing of their unconscious presupposition about what marriage should be, and suffer the consequences.

Why bother? Perhaps because we can *kill* ourselves by our ideas and our religious and parental conditioning. A widow of 62 living out the myth of the youthful American girl, going on dates, seeing herself on the search for a man who will marry her, give her a ring; she is fixed in the cultural myths of a female identity—to the detriment not only of her emotional life but also of her health, her sanity and any opportunity for facing the reality of her own aging. To live in emotional stress, is to live in physical stress. The disordered state of our relationships to others point directly to disorder in our whole body. Depression *kills* us. The high statistics of depression in married women takes its toll in alcoholism, drug abuse and ill health. This task is a spiritual and physical necessity. Those who form long term love relationships *live* longer.

Why bother to confront the myths and images that determine the patterns of our sexual self-image and relationships, Because in my mind, the cultural and religious conditioning that we have received concerning sexuality, sex-roles, views of parenting, marriage and family are by and large destructive whether they come from secular or religious sources. The body/soul dichotomy of Christianity has resulted in the separation of the physical and spiritual. The body has been seen as something to control or exploit.

Christianity throughout its history absorbed views of the body and sex roles that are primarily negative. Modern forms of sexually explicit magazines and films do not, as some suggest, evidence sexual liberation, but rather the exact values ascribed to sexuality by the Christian culture—if sex is bad, evil, dirty, then let's enjoy it—it's *fun* being naughty, sinful.

Being liberated sexually does not mean what the swingers in our culture have erroneously identified as being 'free and easy.' Premarital sex is not better than chastity, adultery no better than fidelity, divorce no better than marriage, fucking than celibacy, homosexuality than hetero-sexuality, if we are driven by those same unconscious forces that compel us. It is a fantasy that the ideals of "sexual freedom," or screw and do what you will, the flimsy marriage of the guys and girls living out the prescribed models of male and female behavior, are any more "liberated" than our grandparents who lived out what was expected of them.

Liberation is a spiritual state that few of us attain and that, as I see it, institutional religion does its best to undermine and secular culture cannot comprehend. The ultimate spiritual authority lies in one's own hands. For much of Christianity the doctrine of free will and self-love is quite overshadowed by the presuppositions that it is an

external authority which gives permission and sets values. Traditionally the sanctions given, the models and roles for human behavior and sexual expression are set down and reinforced by scripture and tradition. Spiritual authority lies however finally not in those but in *one-self*. Is it heresy to say so? Perhaps in strict theistic imagery it would be to say so—but Christianity is not necessarily tied to theism as many have presumed. The idea of God “within,” of the “soul” belonging to God, of the free act of trust made by the individual may also be an indication of a tradition of individual inner spiritual autonomy. The spiritual autonomy rests in the ability to take final responsibility for oneself—seeking need for affirmation when necessary, being open and unfearful about giving and receiving love.

To come to this state of personal spiritual and therefore sexual autonomy may be something we may not hope for until past the age of 40. Jung suggests that personal maturity comes only in a person's middle life. It is at this stage that the inner voices and controls of religious authority/parental authority/cultural values, socialization into sex roles, can finally be dealt with. The compulsion to act out of externally determined values comes under review and the person may come to some freedom of the self and a new level of self-trust. There is finally no one else who can live my life—I live it and *I* die. How exciting that the most important spiritual crisis and opportunity coincides with a heightened awareness of our own aging and approaching death. It is at this point that we can be freed to be at harmony in our own body, and to choose to express ourselves in what ways we need. Cultural roles, other's expectations, religious sanctions begin to be seen as unimportant as we face our own end.

Spiritual liberation will have its counterpart in *Sexual Liberation* that is expressed:

1. In living without fear in terms of one's physical and emotional self-expression to others—parents, friend, lovers, children; in being free to express the full range of the self to others without compulsion.

2. In trusting oneself enough to be unconcerned about fixed roles: A man is this, a woman is that, a child does this, a heterosexual that. In being able to be comfortable in your own choice of orientation.

3. In the absence of fixed roles and self images, a fluid notion of the self and of others is possible. Living without good/bad, right/wrong, secure/insecure labels to sexual or other behavior may seem like a fundamentally irreligious approach. Surely religion is there to

sanction, to approve, justify and condemn? However, I believe that living with fluidity in roles, behavior, values and standards become a true test of spirit. One filled with the spirit is in truth open to the spirit. Accepting self-doubt becomes an avenue to new growth and development and an openness to others.

4. In being comfortable with sexuality *in all* of its bodily expressions. In being able to enjoy the full range of possible bodily experiences that you choose without guilt and fear. For a woman that possibility will mean not only the full range of physical expression in intercourse, but maybe her sexuality as expressed in pregnancy and birth and lactation. For many women it takes *until* they are in their 30s to lose the 'tightness' of their early female conditioning as *nice* girls. It also means women being able to age gracefully, without loss of self-image and self-worth; women being able to know their self-worth is not based on a particular shape or size or age.

5. In being able to use your body to enhance the growth of others. To the extent that our religion and our culture limits and defines male and female roles there is a limitation on male/male and male-child body relations, as well as the type of male/female relations. To hold, to shield, to comfort, to give love are aspects of human sexuality that became totally associated with female nurturing behavior and so get excluded from what is seen as normal male (and thus normal) behavior. Propriety and control are the enemies of all forms of sexual expression. Men distrust their own nurturing side because of cultural norms and religious conditioning about the separation of sex roles into opposites that compliment each other. Women and men in this society fear dependency, their weakness or sickness. In our inability to give nurture we are also unable to ask for it or accept it in our genuine need.

6. Sexual liberation. Is all at peace, can conscious and unconscious wishes be harmonized? Is there still something about sexuality that is not merely cultural and religious conditioning that breeds guilt and shame and fear, Is the strongly negative reaction over children learning about sex—about having the *knowledge* of sex more than a hangover from traditional views of sexuality? I believe it represents an instinctive fear on the part of the parents. Freud was right on this. To know sexuality, "good and evil" means to capture the parents' source of *power*. To know how to procreate is indeed power over life and death—it is a killing of the Mother/Father. Becoming sexually mature puts a child on a level with his parents. For this reason parents

fear—they wish to keep this child dependent—an ultimate hold will be gone, the parent's power will be displaced.

But is there still more? In my view the sexual organs, their design and behavior produce stress and thus anxiety because they are *unpredictable*. Watching a small boy discover his penis, or a little girl wrestle with the security of being the same, or the insecurity of being different—these experiences transcend cultural conditioning and are part of the human condition. For all societies and times, personal and social behavior must deal with this fact of what our bodies do. Sexuality to a large extent *governs us*— and 'we' not it—though our influence on our sexuality lies in our attitude towards it, and we can radically affect our experience of the body. We do menstruate, we do get erections, we do experience sexual pleasure, sometimes in so-called inappropriate moments or for inappropriate people. Our modern lifestyle is antithetical to sexuality. In the view of time, order, planning and restraints—we hedge our lives about with neatness and precision—to the detriment of the ebb and flow of natural rhythms and the unpredictability of sexual patterns. I think the *very ordered quality* of our lives, our sense of appropriate time, our view of the human being as a performance model car mitigates against men and women being free in their own sexuality. We are intolerant of any idea of phases of time, phases of productivity, appropriate behaviours for one time and not another. Having become freed from our dependency on the cycle of nature (we can now eat oranges in January), our cultural assumptions presume that we do and be the same in all aspects of life. The nine to five job—presuming exact patterns of energy and performance is matched by cultural presuppositions for the right time for making love, the right time for having babies. The very fact of control over procreativity with all its benefits places a burden on childbearing—children must fit in our work-schedule, must be conceived in time, nursed on time and toilet trained in time—otherwise they are unacceptable to ourselves and society. We make no allowances, we don't hang loose to the changing needs and patterns of our own bodies, our sexuality. The model of human existence has been so rigid and performance so oriented that men and women are placed under stress. The roles and distribution of labour typical of North America places all in jeopardy: Men = work, be successful, work long hours—deny your family relationships, your fathering. Women = parent totally, and suffer the isolation and loss of confidence typical of such roles or struggle to keep job and family going, making sure your sexual needs as procreator do not disturb the career of Job! Women in their procreative phase are seen as problems by the world

of work. To have a baby is a personal decision, a personal problem. Women suffer the consequences. If a woman is so bold as to enter a man's world she must deal with the consequences and make the arrangements.

We are inflexible in our *work* patterns and view of time. We retire people forcibly at the age of 65 or 62, we do not recognize the phases of people's productivity. In the academic world, creative production is expected on an assembly line basis—how many articles did you get published last year? In no way do we wait or leave time for what may take years to mature in intellectual or creative thought.

The same model affects our view of our own sexuality. More attention to our own internal rhythms, emotional, intellectual and sexual could liberate us from false "performance" sexual mythology with permeates the how-to-books about sexuality. Self-acceptance implies being freed from the idea of one's body as a machine which should perform when we send it an order. The psychosomatic harmony that is spiritual liberation means an acceptance of the changes and rhythms of one's own body.

In our sense of cultural 'time' we have little place for unpredictability. This is the cause of our great adolescent anxiety about sexuality—*What if*—it is also our fear concerning pregnancy, concerning the *quality* of our ejaculation or orgasms. Unpredictability is essentially associated with sexuality, getting an erection in an embarrassing situation, our particular experience of pregnancy or birth—we don't laugh in this culture, we get *up tight*. It is of course our inability to find a place for the unpredictability of sexuality that is part of our fear of death. Thinking that control is the ideal, we mistakenly believe we can control everything and forget the reality of aging and death. Perhaps there is no way in this culture with its values to 'hang loose' to the body and its rhythms and be liberated spiritually and sexually. Those who wish to find peace in themselves and their relationships will have to deny aspects of the cultural models and goals as well as the traditional religious ones. Being able to enjoy one's procreativity and one's non-procreativity (each having value) means having an attitude of flexibility. We are conditioned to believe that we are the same all our lives. What we choose will stay the same and that there will be no developmental elements inherent within one's own growth. Our poor sexuality. We have made it so difficult for ourselves. It is either too much too soon, too little too late, too big, too small, the wrong timing, illegitimate, not enough, too fast, we have too many children, or they have all gone away, we are either a dirty old man, or a cradle snatcher! Why does it seem so difficult?

Our personal spiritual maturity will coincide with sexual maturity. Constraints of time, false sex rules, the 'oughts' and 'should nots' of inner and outer voices will disappear together with false self-images and self-expectations and compulsive needs for affirmation from others. Accepting our own dependencies, our dependency on our body, on others, will give rise not to stoic self-sufficiency but to a self who is whole and at peace.

What would be the characteristics of such an attitude in relation to the institutional church and to others? It would not be based on need for approval or laid through with guilt. How then do we reach such a position, attain an inner harmony of body and soul? Not by making ourselves more anxious and inadequate, but by a serious encounter with all our fears, all the "if it weren't for—you or this or that—I would . . ." perhaps going through the process of removing all our securities—so that we may grow. It will be painful. We must begin by describing, listening, articulating to ourselves and others what the particular nature of experience is about. The role of confession is to tell, but not to condemn.

I believe that finding a sexual and personal wholeness means denying fundamental cultural values. We work too much, driven by capitalist ideals. The technical success that is our North American dream has proved detrimental to the body and our health mentally and physically. We need to reclaim our sense of personal *time*. If we worked less but longer into old age, if we did not see human beings as tools to be used and expended, with the resulting glorification of youth and the disparagement of age—of course, we would not be so rich. The ecological crisis of our time begins in our own bodies. The ecology of the body is our own sexuality. We have raped the land and shaped ourselves into products to be used and marketed and replaced by other models.

The distress of our own times in the area of human relations and the inability to form lasting friendships is the by-product of our technical success. The toll this takes in the longevity and general health and level of personal satisfaction is remarkable. To find the personal harmony means to think of oneself more as a tree than a machine. To know that there are phases of growth, time for pruning, and blossoming—the need to give care and attention. To celebrate our sexuality involves finding an organic model for human experience and knowing one's wholeness.

"Listening between the bedposts." The search for sexual wholeness and spiritual wholeness go hand in hand. Attentiveness to the

nature of our own sexuality can teach us much and suggest a pattern and a purpose. It is no accident that in the description, or *the story telling*, the redemptive or healing element may emerge. This is after all in the best of all religious traditions. In listening to ourselves, to others, we may begin to experience an expression of sexuality as healing, bringing joy and peace to ourselves and others.

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