

Romance, Sexuality and Spirituality

BY IRENE ALEXANDER

In the mythical story of Tristan and Iseult, the forerunner of Romeo and Juliet, the lovers desire for each other becomes worship. They believe that only the other can give them life, that death is better than life without their beloved. This is an inner belief that we in the West have inherited with our culture. The story marks the shift from the ideal being spiritual to the seeking of earthly fulfilment of this other-worldly longing.

Woven into this tragic love story is the merging together of courtly love and sexual romance. Robert Johnson (1985) explains that, previously, there had been “courtly love”, which was love at a distance, on a spiritual level: “the model was the brave knight who worshipped a fair lady as his inspiration, the symbol of all beauty and perfection, the ideal, that moved him to be noble, spiritual, refined, and high-minded” (pxiii). In the Tristan and Iseult myth and the stories that have followed it, there has been a movement away from the spiritual and towards a personalizing and sexualizing of these ideals: “In our time we have mixed courtly love into our sexual relationships and marriages, but we still hold the medieval belief that true love has to be the ecstatic adoration of a man or woman who carries, for us, the image of perfection” (pxiii). Johnson shows that, in our culture, we have come to see the romantic–sexual relationship as the one that should somehow make us whole:

“As a mass phenomenon, romantic love is peculiar to the West (pxi) ... This is a psychological phenomenon that is very specific. When we are “in love” we believe we have found the ultimate meaning in life, reified in another human being. We feel we are finally completed” (pxii).

Johnson makes it very clear that our longing is to experience sexuality, especially when mixed with



romance, as a peak experience. We long for something to complete us, to give meaning to our lives. As a culture, we have shifted our gaze from a transcendent God to personal romantic–sexual relationships. Johnson calls this the great wound of the Western psyche – the expectation that individual relationships will bring us fulfilment. He suggests that it is only in facing this and embracing the pain of moving through it that we will develop into more whole beings and a healthier culture will result.

In contrast to this romantic wounding, Origen, an early father of the Church, (185–254 AD) talks of the “wound of love” as the soul’s desire for God (Greer 1979, p223). Downing, in his exploration of C. S. Lewis’ understanding of joy, expresses it thus: “the wound of love” [describes] the intense longing of the soul bride for Christ the bridegroom” (2005 p62). What these authors are recognizing is that we, as humans, have an intense longing for intimacy, union, transcendence. It is a wound of love that Origen perceived to be a spiritual longing for the Divine, but which the West has come to view as a romantic, sexual yearning. We have misunderstood what is the deepest meeting of our human need. In naming this as our desire, we are able to move beyond it. In acknowledging the deep longing of romantic, sexual love, we can accept other people as human, not divine, and find that God is the answer to the deeper longing underlying what we have interpreted as being a romantic, sexual longing.

Every committed couple faces this challenge. It involves accepting that their partner – the one they have fallen in love with and are expecting to fulfil their heart’s desires – is human, not divine, and so their love needs to change from ecstatic worship to a more grounded, committed love. This does not mean that we should repress and deny sexuality, as the Church traditionally has done, but, rather, acknowledge and accept ourselves as sexual beings so that we can come into the presence of God more completely.

The Bible itself has various stories that tell us things about sexuality and romance. Sex is not hidden away as it has been in much of Church history. The power of sexual attraction is certainly named – the stories of David and Bathsheba, Samson and Delilah are known by many who have never even thought of reading the Bible. There is another story that is less well known and shows how potent and capricious sexual desire can be. It is the story of Amnon, David’s son, and his half-sister Tamar, by one of David’s other wives. Amnon falls in love with Tamar, rapes her and then, in the terse words of the biblical story, “hated her more than he had loved her” (2 Samuel 13:15). This story is simply included among the others about David’s life. It is part of the journey of Absalom towards his attempt to take the kingdom away from David. In his anger, Absalom plots and kills Amnon, his half-brother, two years after the rape.

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Thus, it can be seen that the Bible does not try to hide the strength of sexual desire, nor the weaknesses of human beings. However, neither does it make sexual sin out to be unforgivable. Solomon, to whom God grants the gift of wisdom, is the son of David and Bathsheba. Solomon, presumably, writes the beautiful love song that is the Song of Solomon, which we have kept as part of our scriptures. This book is specifically sexual and sets sexual love squarely inside human and spiritual reality.

“O that he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine ... Draw me after you and let us run together. The king has brought me into his chamber. How beautiful you



are my darling, how beautiful you are ...”
(Song of Solomon 1:2, 4, 15).

These verses can be thought of as purely sexual or purely spiritual and, indeed, many Bible commentaries have opted for one or the other of these interpretations. Alternatively, we can understand that it is more complex than that and sexuality is a God-given gift for ecstatic union as well as being a metaphor for our relationship with the Divine Beloved.

Paul encompasses both interpretations, bringing together the earthly marriage relationship and the bride of Christ metaphor: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh. This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the Church. However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself” (Ephesians 5: 31-33). Paul is thus talking about both levels of union – married sexuality and the union of human beings with our God. “It is a profound mystery”, he says, acknowledging the complexity and difficulty that humans have with these matters.

By inheriting Western culture, we have absorbed these ambiguous responses and beliefs about romance and sexuality. We accept the potency of sexual desire, we long for a romantic–sexual union to bring us into an experience of fulfilment, yet we have separated it from spirituality, the true peak of human ecstasy. We may be able to acknowledge that, in lesser areas, staying with our desire will bring us eventually to the Divine, but it



is more difficult to believe that staying present in sexual desire can also bring us into deeper relationship with our Creator God.

The story of Jesus meeting with the woman at the well shows an interaction that revolves around sexuality, desire and brokenness. The woman had had five husbands and the man she was living with at the time she met Jesus was not her husband. In my reading of the story, she knows that she has used her sexuality to try and meet her deep needs and continues to do so. I am sure Jesus was aware of that, but was unfazed by it. I do not believe that that was because he saw sexuality as bad or unworthy of response, but, rather, because he was consistently responding to her deeper desire – her desire for connection, intimacy, spirituality.

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I am convinced that one of the reasons for the success of the bestseller *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown 2003), (apart from it being a good yarn) is that it suggests Jesus was human enough to be sexual and allows a woman to share centre stage with him. Our society has a longing for a God who includes the feminine, is earthy and sexual and yet is still God. *The Da Vinci Code* was not doing away with Jesus as divine, although it was certainly questioning the Church’s interpretation of him.

Over the centuries, the Church has had an uneasy relationship with sexuality, preferring either to ignore it or condemn it. The Bible, in contrast has been upfront about the ecstasy as well as the danger of sexual encounters. While the *Song of Solomon* is the prime example of spiritual–sexual writing in the Bible, this theme is certainly also present in the writings of many of the mystics and is a metaphor often alluded to by the prophetic writings. The intersection of spirituality and sexuality has a long tradition in Christian writing, not just as a metaphor but also as a recognition of our embodiedness, our humanity. God chose to share in that embodiedness in the incarnation, the centrepiece of revealing himself to us.

Clearly, spirituality and sexuality overlap – they both have to do with our deepest longings, both have to do with true intimacy and both are about our greatest vulnerability. The purpose of each is to find another – another person or another being – and becoming truly open to them. The best of both sexuality and spirituality can be represented by the Garden of Eden phrase “to be naked and not ashamed” (Genesis 2:22). The ideal is to be able to be naked before another person in sexual intimacy and not be ashamed of our nakedness, and to be naked before God and not be ashamed of our naked transparency and our longing before him. God seeing us as we truly are and our not being ashamed of that, is true spirituality.

My sexuality is an important part of my identity, part of how I relate, part of what energizes me. Some of us can accept that but then do not take the next step – bringing my sexuality into God’s presence. Many people somehow try to leave their sexuality at the door of the church, leave it out of their prayers. In their chapter on sexuality and prayer, Ann and Barry Ulanov suggest why:

“Most things we leave out of our praying are things that frighten us, embarrass us, or make us ashamed. Sexuality needs to be faced and included in just those particular terms, with just those special variations that insist upon our individuality. God loves all of us, and therefore our sexual lives too. So we must bring to prayer the excitements, the wonders, the confusions and the bruises that make up our lives in this area, just as much as we bring the issues and problems of spirit and soul” (1988, p76).

In fact, our sexuality reflects the very core of being human. At one level, sexuality is a metaphor for our spirituality. It is a concrete image of what we are like in our deepest being. Henri Nouwen expresses it like this: “Our sexuality reveals to us our enormous yearning for communion. The desires of our body – to be touched, embraced and safely held – belong to the deepest longings of the heart, and are very concrete signs of our search for oneness” (1992, p70). God created us to be in relationship and our sexuality pushes us to recognize that. I wonder how many of us would be hermits, or certainly unmarried, if it were not for sexual desire propelling us into relationships.

In reflecting on sexuality, it is important to recognize that it relates to the whole of our being – it is not just the sexual act of intercourse. It is part of the energy system of our being, it is present in all our relationships and, without it, we are quite mechanical or robotic. So much of story and film is intensified by sexuality, the sexual tension that draws people into relationships. In

some ways, we have learned to think of this as bad or dangerous, but it is a God-created danger. It seems that God chose to take the risk of creating us as sexual beings, giving us an inordinate yearning for relationship, so that we would continually seek connection, spark off each other and return to the subject of relationship again and again. It is as though we needed something to propel us out of our self-centredness to participate with others.

Sexuality demonstrates to us that love is dangerous and creative, fulfilling and stripping, ever-emerging and challenging. Sexuality shows us the essence of relationship, that love is not a weakened “being nice” or living in codependence, but wild and untameable, life-giving and demanding, insistent on honesty and self-giving. Neither sexuality nor real love allow us to stay safely in the false self. Both call us to grow beyond our safe boundaries, to be vulnerable and authentic.

David Schnarch (1997), a sex therapist, explains that the sexual relationship is a window on to how we relate at all levels. Because of the power of sex and our sexual urges, it exposes the reality of our relationship patterns, challenging us to be honest and grow. It illustrates for us how love is meant to be lived out, in authenticity, generosity and nakedness. It shows us the risk we take when we love – in fact, when we are truly human. As John tells us, “The person who refuses to love doesn’t know the first thing about God, because God is love – so you can’t know him if you don’t love ... No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us” (1 John 4: 8,12).

Our sexuality, then, is not only part of being human but also part of being created “very good”. Spirituality and sexuality are very close together. Both are about intimacy, nakedness, being known.

Viktor Frankl, a psychologist and survivor of the Holocaust, saw these dimensions as layers. He saw the outermost layer as being the sexual level. The romantic, or erotic, penetrates more deeply “into the psychic structure of the other person ... we are also “infatuated” with the other’s psychic characteristics” (1965, p134). He saw spirituality – loving the other person – as being the deepest layer: “Loving ... alone penetrates as deeply as possible into the personal structure of the partner. Loving represents a coming to relationship with another as a spiritual being” (p135).

Sexuality, and the metaphor that it is, can thus lead us to our deeper desire – to our longing for connection with God. Down the centuries, the mystics have frequently used the language of “lover” and “beloved”. The Song of Solomon is a prime example. Teresa of Avila is known

for her metaphor of the Interior Castle and the Spiritual Marriage as illustrating stages of the spiritual journey. Ulanov and Ulanov write, “When we read the giants of prayer, we discover how frequently they include sexuality in their visions of God and in their metaphors and allegories of relation to God. The highly charged language of the Song of Songs is everywhere in their writings. The abiding rhetoric in Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St Thierry, gathered from the Old Testament sources, is of sexual embrace” (1988 p73).

Recognizing the parallel between sexuality and spirituality can open a door for us, enable us to bring all of our being into relationship with the Divine and see that our spirituality and our deepest hungers can find their fulfilment in God, while holding sacred our human sexual relationships.

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