

## Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Spirituality and Sexuality

*Audire  
Year 1*

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The experience occurred during a midnight Eucharistic service on Christmas Eve several years ago. I was on a sabbatical leave in Cambridge, England. My wife and I and several friends, having celebrated the earlier part of the evening with good food and conversation, were at the late evening service at King's College Chapel. As gothic buildings go, surely that is one of the most glorious. And it is gloriously sexual. Its thrusting phallic towers frame those labial doors leading to the interior womb. There is serenity within, but with it a marked sensuousness. During the day soft light filters through the elegant stained glass, and during evening services the candles cast their glow on dark wood mellowed by centuries of worshipers. And, of course, King's Chapel is the home of some of the finest choral and organ music to be heard anywhere.

Then there is the Rubens painting. Mounted above the altar is Peter Paul Rubens' *Adoration of the Magi*. While he had never been a favorite artist of mine (somehow his work seemed a bit too voluptuous), I have studied that painting from time to time in previous visits to the chapel and found myself increasingly attracted to it. At the center are Mary and the babe. Surrounding them are Joseph, the magi, and their companions. Hovering above are two cherubic angels. The colors are warm, even erotic: reds, golds, blues. But the most striking is the manner in which every other figure in the painting is reaching out toward the infant Christ. Reaching in wonder, desire, longing. Reaching toward fulfillment.

As I knelt at the altar rail to receive the sacrament, I found myself unusually moved by wonder, desire, and longing. More surprising than the intensity of the emotions themselves were the bodily sensations. I was feeling unmistakable sexual arousal. My entire body-self was longing for the divine. "The Desire of Nations" had become a compelling personal desire. Eros and agape seemed merged.

I have since reflected on that experience from time to time. That it was an unusual occurrence is undoubted proof of my own continuing spiritual fragmentation. But the fact that in that moment (and on some other occasions less dramatically) I *knew* that the Christian spiritual life is meant to involve the totality of the self---yes, the sexual self---provides a continuing promise and hope.

Paul Ricoeur has observed three major stages in the evolution of Western understandings of sexuality in relation to religion. The earliest stage, he notes, identified two realms. Sexuality was incorporated into the believer's total understanding of reality through patterns of myth, ritual, and symbol. When the great religions arose during the second stage there came a separation. Now the sacred was experienced as transcendent, untouchable, separate---heavenly and not earthly. The meanings of sexuality were demythologized and limited to a small part of the total order, essentially that of procreation within the institution of marriage. The power of sexuality was to be restrained by discipline, and when sexual expression threatened to break out of the prescribed order its power was feared and condemned.

A third period is now emerging, however, marked by the concern to release once again "the lyricism of life" in uniting sexuality with the experience of the sacred and of the cosmic order. The concern is prompted by new, more wholistic understandings of the person and of the ways in which sexuality is present in the total range of human experience. If during the second period sexuality (particularly sexual desire) was viewed as a distraction to the life of mind and spirit, now there is a growing recognition that sexuality is so involved in the center of a person's life and of his or her powers of

creativity that its denial thwarts the deepest possibilities of human fulfillment. Sexual expression still needs ordering and discipline, yes, but that is quite different from the denial of the spiritual power of sexuality itself.

Already it should be apparent that I am using two key terms rather broadly, and quite deliberately so. By spirituality I mean not only the conscious religious disciplines and practices through which human beings related to God, but more inclusively the whole style and meaning of our relationship to that which we perceive as of ultimate worth and power. This includes disciplines and practices, but also myths, symbols, and rituals, informal as well as formal. It includes the affective as well as the cognitive. Significantly, spirituality includes the ways in which our relatedness to the ultimate affects our understandings and feelings of relatedness to everyone and everything else.

By sexuality I mean not only physiological arousal and genital activity, but also much more. While human sexuality is not the whole of our personhood, it is a basic dimension of that personhood. While it does not determine all thought, feeling, and action, it does permeate and affect all of these. Sexuality is our way of being in the world as female or male persons. It involves our appropriation of characteristics socially defined as feminine or masculine. It includes our affectional-sexual orientation toward those of the opposite and/or of the same sex. It is our attitudes toward ourselves and others as *body-selves*. It is our capacity for sensuousness. It is all of this.

The intimate relation between sexuality and spirituality is evident if one believes, as I do, that sexuality is both a symbol and a means of communication and communion. The mystery of sexuality is the mystery of the human need to reach out for the physical and spiritual embrace of others. Sexuality thus expresses God's intention that people find authentic humanness not in isolation but in relationship. In sum, sexuality always involves much more than what we do with our genitals. More fundamentally, it is who we are as *body-selves* who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion, both creaturely and divine.

Perhaps these definitions seem too ideal, belonging to Ricoeur's third period. Realistically, we know that sexual alienation abounds. It is alienation from ourselves (bodies feel foreign, or bodies are used as pleasure machines). It is alienation from others (we fear intimacy and vulnerability; we use sexuality in patterns of domination and submission). It is alienation from God (sexuality seems alien to "true spirituality").

The historical roots of sexual alienation are not difficult to find. They emerged as two intertwining dualisms. Spiritualistic dualism (spirit over body, mind over matter) emerged with power in late Hellenistic Greece and made a lasting impact upon the Christian church. Championed by the Neoplatonists, this dualism viewed the immortal spirit as a temporary prisoner in a mortal, corruptible body. The good life and, indeed, salvation itself required escape from flesh into spirit. Sexist or patriarchal dualism (man over woman) is the twin of spiritualism. While Old Testament life was not strongly marked by spiritualism, patriarchal dualism abounded, and it too found a home in the emerging Christian community. It involved the systematic subordination of women in interpersonal relations, in institutions, in thought forms, and in religious life. But the two dualisms became inextricably intertwined as men assumed to themselves superiority in spirit and reason while identifying women with body, earthiness, irrationality, and instability.

So we Christians today live between the times, or perhaps we live between the gardens. One garden is the Erotic Garden, that depicted in The Song of Songs. This much misinterpreted piece of scripture is a biblical love poem celebrating the joys of erotic love between a woman and a man. Even though through much of Christian history it was allegorized into a symbol of the purely spiritual life purged of any carnal reality, the Canticles is a sexual story.

But it is sexuality beyond the fall. In this garden there is no bodily shame. This garden and its inhabitants are thoroughly sensual. The woman and the man delight not only in each other's embodiedness but also in the sensuous delights surrounding them—trees, fruits, flowers, fountains of living water. In this garden there is no sexist dualism, no hint of patriarchy, no dominance or submission. The woman is fully the equal of the man. Independent, she works, takes initiatives, and has an identity of her own apart from her lover. The two alternate in inaugurating their meetings. Each exults in the body and beauty of the other, and together they embrace their sexuality without the guilt of exploitation.

The Garden of Eden depicted in the Yahwist creation story, Genesis 2-3, is different. Here the results of the fall into sexual dualism are evident. There is shame in nakedness. The whole material world participates in the fall. Work itself is cursed and childbirth marked with alienating pain. The writer of this garden story seems to depict the woman as derivative of the man.

In all this there is something of a literary irony. The Garden of Eden, which is mythic, seems to give the more realistic portrayal of the human sexual story, whereas the real historical tale of two lovers, the Canticles, seems to border on sexual myth. Nevertheless, one might ask, which is “realistic,” our alienation or our possibility?

If there are two basic traditions regarding sexuality represented in the two gardens—one emphasizing creation and human creative capacity, the other emphasizing the fall and the need for pardon and redemption---there are also two broad tendencies in Western Christian spirituality which have significant parallel. And it is quite obvious that sin-redemption spirituality has dominated creation-centered spirituality. Furthermore, the domination has been so steady that it has been taken for granted.

The intimate linkage of sin-redemption spirituality with sexual dualism is striking. Its roots in the early Church Fathers and, particularly, in Augustine were sunk in the same soil that nurtured an ongoing Christian commitment to both Hellenistic and patriarchal dualisms. In both literature and practice the dominant Western spirituality denigrated women as less than fully human. In the name of holiness it was deeply suspicious of the human body. It exalted a life devoid of passion. Its focus on salvation history left little thought for nature. It said much about private piety but little about social justice.

Three students of our spirituality traditions speak to these issues. Mary Aileen Schmiel believes that the concentration on a metaphysics of fall-redemption has meant a systematic exile of the positive creative power destined for persons made in the Creator's image.

In adopting a dualistic cosmology, by separating the City of God from the city of man/woman, we have divorced the law from the spirit, or political justice from religious consciousness. Even within religion, we have concentrated entirely upon “worship,” which is directed toward transcendence of everyday life, and excluded celebration, which brings a God-consciousness to earth.

Likewise, Nicolas Berdyaev argues that sin-redemption spirituality has contributed mightily to the split between church and world: the church is seen as concerned with salvation while the world is concerned with creativity. “Salvation is the primary task, the first necessity; creativity is a secondary or tertiary task, a supplement to life, but not its very essence.”

The most searing summary indictment of this dominant spirituality remains for Matthew Fox to make:

It has failed to resist docetism and the dehumanizing of Jesus and the incarnation event. In its dualistic view of the world it pits salvation history against history, supernature against nature, soul against body, redemption

against creation, artist against intellectual, heaven (and hell) against earth, the sensual against the spiritual, man against woman, individual against society, and condemns all those with a cosmic vision (creation after all *is* cosmic) as pantheists.

The movement toward a more healed, wholistic spirituality and the movement toward a more healed, wholistic sexuality cannot be separated. It is not just that they *ought* not to be separated; quite literally they *cannot* be. One is necessary to the other. They are inseparable elements of full personhood. True, we Christians live between the two gardens. But if our spirituality has been one-sided in its sin-redemption emphasis, the vision of the Erotic Garden might help us. Some comment on several dimensions of a spirituality informed by the garden may illustrate this.

*Feeling* is one such dimension. Feeling includes emotion, but it is more. It is the wholeness of the human response to reality, involving both cognition and emotion. It is the willingness to respond with as much of the totality of the self as one is able. It is the capacity to be deeply aroused by what one experiences. But feeling is inseparable from the sexual body-self. Both psychologists and psychiatrists give ample testimony that dissociation from one's body and one's sexuality brings with it shallowness of feeling---or even, in a dramatic case such as a schizophrenic episode, the incapacity to feel at all. But when one has a unified sense of the body-self, one is more apt to respond with feeling, for then one can listen to the messages from all the self's aspects: the mind, the heart, the genitals, the viscera, the spiritual sensitivities.

*Desire* is obvious in sexuality. The Canticles depicts it as a major theme of the Erotic Garden, in which it is evidently the erotic desire of lover for lover. What is less obvious is that desire, erotic desire, is intrinsic to spirituality. More than Roman Catholics, Protestants have been conditioned by understandings of revelation that make the human being into receptor only, a passive, waiting vessel who can only respond to the divine initiative. But this is to impoverish the erotic dimension of knowing another, including knowing God.

The ancient Hebrews knew better when they occasionally used the verb to know as a synonym for sexual intercourse, for the sexual act at its best is the union of desiring and knowing. If I desire another sexually without wanting deep personal knowledge or living communion with the partner, then I treat the other as object, as means to my own gratification. But in the union of desiring and knowing, I treat my partner as a self, the treasured participant in communion. We both know and desire with the same flesh.

If desire is a way to knowledge of another human being, it is also a pathway to the Holy. Long before the unfortunate theological disjunction between agape and eros, the Hebrew psalmist knew that erotic desire was intrinsic to communion with God: "As a doe longs for running streams, so longs my soul for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, the God of Life [Ps. 42:1-2, JB]." In a similar vein Charles Davis has affirmed the self-transcending power of sexual love: "The erotic dynamism of bodily love is not an arbitrary and somewhat bold and dangerous symbol, but an intrinsic element in the movement of an embodied person in openness toward the plenitude of reality, toward God."

*Communion* is a term that might almost be synonymous with spirituality. The richest times of spiritual awareness are pervaded by both desire for and experience of communion with God, and hence also with human beings and nature. Affirmation of the sexual dimension of the human relationship with God can assist us, I am convinced, in overcoming that commonly felt subject-object dichotomy in religious experience. In authentic sexual communion with a beloved human partner, whether that communion is genitally expressed or not, the dichotomy between persons is overcome while a rich polarity remains. It is unity, though not unification. Each self respects the other's

identity, not confusing it with its own wishes or fantasies, and, in the ecstasy of mutual giving and receiving, creative differences remain.

The sexual experience of overcoming dichotomy without absorption into the human partner is more than simply an analogy for human communion with God. Both are of one piece. One capacity participates in the other. Moreover, an inability to overcome the sense of distance between God and the self means a fading awareness of divine immanence. It is then that God is no longer experienced as vital, indwelling presence permeating the stuff of everyday life. Rather, God seems to be only object opposed to subject. And when immanence fades, God's transcendence also becomes less real.

In Christian liturgy the eucharist (surely *the* sacramental expression of body theology) is the paradigmatic experience of communion, the earthly symbol of the ultimate unity promised to all in God's New Age. In the sacrament individuality is not erased; rather, deeply unique individuals are bonded together. Thus communion, in whatever form, is participation in the other. It is different from possession, wherein I objectify the other and desire control. In participation there is intersubjectivity. Between God and the self there is not just relationship but an interdwelling of personal presences.

*Incarnation*, as will be discussed in chapter 2, expresses the intimate link between sexuality and spirituality. Indeed, it is the central connection. Human bodies are designed as instruments of communion. There is implanted deep within us an eros, a yearning toward intimate relation. Augustine's well-known prayer put it this way: "Thou hast created us for thyself, O God, so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." Incarnational theology fully affirms those words. It only wishes to add the clarification that the God toward whom our restlessness presses us is met in flesh. The material body has not only been pronounced good, it has been graced as vehicle of the divine presence.

Christian faith has traditionally affirmed that the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is the unique, unrepeatable, sufficient revelation. In overstating the case and in shifting the description of the divine-human presence to a metaphysical problem of two natures, however, the tradition has effectively lost the mystery and reality of God's continuing and repeated incarnation in and through human flesh. The paradox is that God's incarnation in Jesus is sufficient only if it nourishes repetition. Jesus as Christ is our faith community's paradigm, our living symbol of God's *ongoing* embodiment—and of the possibility of our being, in some measure, body-words of the divine love.

Finally, *compassion* is integral to spirituality, and it too is intimately related to our sexuality. If the spirituality informed by the Erotic Garden refused to block out the body, neither will it block out the body politic. While much of Western spirituality has been the quest for individual perfection, compassion demands that spirituality be utterly social and universally embracing. Compassion is not paternalistic pity but rather an egalitarian and passionate caring about persons and institutions. If spirituality means kinship with God, it means kinship with God's universe.

The connection of compassion with sexuality, as Matthew Fox has observed, is captured in the feminist version of the old camp song: "Climbing Jacob's Ladder" has become "Dancing Sarah's Circle." Ladder-oriented spirituality is rooted in the sexual dualisms. Male-dominated religiosity has leaned heavily toward transcendence, movement away from the earth, privatism, and hierarchical organization. Such religiosity, which has denigrated the human body, has not been highly motivated to take on social-justice issues—which, after all, are material and body issues. In contrast, the healing of the body-spirit split and of the man-woman split promises a much more compassionate spirituality. It will be more sensuous and earthy, hence concerned with the interdependence of all things. It will be a dancing, celebrating spirituality that finds

works of justice the cause for celebration. It will be a spirituality that challenges the compassionate creativity of the human being.

These, then, are some marks of a spirituality informed by the vision of the Erotic Garden: feeling, desire, communion, incarnation, and compassion. But the movement in this direction needs to be undergirded by changes in Christian community. For one thing, our theology must be resexualized. This does not mean putting sexuality into a theology from which it has been absent, for it has always been there. Rather, it means changes that will overcome the sexual dualisms which have plagued Christian thought. Our understanding of God is the central case in point. Because our imagery and language have been so one-sidedly masculine, a masculinist-shaped spirituality has resulted. Hence we have experienced God dominantly as noun, as transcendence, as order, as structure, as law, as rationality. A more androgynous theological imagery and language will help us to experience God also as verb, as immanence, as creativity, as vulnerability, as flow, and as absolute relatedness to creation.

The affirmation of human sexuality is part and parcel of these latter ways of experiencing God. It is a commonly attested phenomenon that when a person becomes more comfortable and affirmative as a sexual human being (including, to be sure, the sexual celibate), he or she is also more open to a whole range of life's joy and pain. There is a greater capacity to undergo change. Life becomes less static and closed, more dynamic and open. Likewise, when a person is deeply "in love" with another, these things seem to occur also. Perhaps the affirmation of the sexuality present in our love for God and God's love for us can affect us even more grandly with the dynamism of the Cosmic Love.

Not only the theological but also the liturgical life of the Christian community needs resexualizing. Spiritualistic dualism has made the church uneasy about the bodily implications of its worship, having proclaimed the body as incidental to the life and of the spirit. Sexist dualism has masculinized liturgy in both image and language. But the reform of these dualisms can be accompanied by an enhanced recognition of the positive sexual dimensions in Christian liturgical and sacramental life. And the discovery of this in worship can only aid the discovery of the sacramentality that is hidden in human sexuality.

Further, if compassion as social justice is an important mark of Christian spirituality, the church will need to attend more perceptively to the ways in which the unhealed sexual dualisms contribute so heavily to the great social problems of the day. Social violence is but one example. Whether it is violence through crime on the streets or through a world arms race, the sex-role distortions of hypermasculinism are importantly in the picture. And if social violence might be mitigated through greater healing of sexist dualism, it will also be lessened through the healing of body-spirit dualism. Cross-cultural anthropological studies reveal significant links between body repression and social violence in some societies. The opposite is true in others, where there is a positive correlation between bodily affirmation and societal peacefulness.

In any event, the links between sexuality and spirituality are profound. Because the dualisms have done their alienating work so effectively, Christians fail to recognize many of these connections. We do live between the times, and between the two gardens. But the journey of discovery is a promising one for those who believe that the Word is still made flesh in order that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

**Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience**

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