

## I

This essay begins with definitions of the key terms - "sexuality", "Christian identity" and "spirituality". It then examines the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in creation and Christian life. We then ask what would identify this relationship as Christian. One possibility is to define Christian identity through norms of conduct. However, we are reminded that our identity as Christians ultimately rests in our being called by Christ. The essay concludes with some thoughts on the implications of this for the relationship between our sexuality and our spirituality.

## II

James Nelson offers a helpful definition of "sexuality".

It is our way of being in the world as gendered persons, having male or female biological structures and socially internalized self-understandings of those meanings to us. Sexuality means having feelings and attitudes about being "body-selves". [...] Above all, sexuality is the desire for intimacy and communion, both emotionally and physically. It is the physiological and psychological grounding of our capacity to love.<sup>1</sup>

Identity has the dictionary meanings of "absolute sameness; individuality, personality".<sup>2</sup> "Christian identity", then, is the sum of those characteristics that distinguish something or someone as being Christian. It is that which *identifies* a thing (or person) as Christian.

As a theological term, "spirituality" is the outworking in life of a person's religious faith - what a person does with what he or she believes. Alister McGrath gives this as a basic definition:

Christian spirituality concerns the quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence, involving the bringing together of the fundamental ideas of Christianity and the whole experience of living on the basis of and within the scope of the Christian faith.<sup>3</sup>

Christian spirituality refers to the way in which we live out of the encounter with Jesus Christ, to the way Christianity is understood and the practices that have been developed to foster and sustain relationship with Christ. It has, McGrath suggests, three main elements: (1) a set of beliefs, (2) a set of values, and (3) a way of life.<sup>4</sup> To quote Matthew Fox:

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<sup>1</sup> James Nelson, *The intimate connection: male sexuality, masculine spirituality*, London: SPCK, 1992, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Concise Oxford dictionary*, 7th edn, J.B. Sykes (ed.), Oxford: Clarendon, 1982, p. 495.

<sup>3</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian spirituality: an introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3

It is essential to remember that *spirituality is praxis*, the practice of religion. [...] While learning is essential to healthy religion, it is no substitute for praxis. *Thinking* about God is no substitute for *tasting* God, and *talking* about God is no substitute for giving people ways of *experiencing* God.<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis original.)

### III

Paul Ricoeur observed three stages in the evolution of Western religious understanding of sexuality.<sup>6</sup> In the earliest stage, sexuality was incorporated into the believer's total consciousness through myth, ritual and symbol. With the great religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) there was a separation. The sacred was transcendent, untouchable and separate. Sexuality was demythologised and limited to a small, earthly, role - principally procreation within marriage. Its feared power was restrained by discipline. A third era is now emerging in which sexuality is again being united with the experience of the sacred and of the created universe. There is a more holistic understanding of the human person and of sexuality within the total human experience. Sexual expression needs ordering and discipline, but rather than being a distraction to the life of the mind and spirit, it contributes to deepest human fulfilment.

James Nelson describes the present era in terms of a change in paradigm.

Characteristic of the old paradigm are:

- theologies about human sexuality;
- sexuality as either incidental to or detrimental to the divine-human relationship;
- sin as essentially wrong sexual acts, violations of sexual norms;
- salvation as antithetical to sexuality; and
- sexuality as incidental to the life of the church.

In contrast, the new paradigm proposes:

- sexual theologies;
- sexuality as intrinsic to the divine human relationship;
- sin as alienation from our divinely intended sexuality;
- salvation as including the recovery of sexual wholeness; and
- sexuality as fundamental to and pervasive in the life of the church.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Fox, *Creation spirituality: liberating gifts for the peoples of the Earth*, San Francisco: Harper, 1991, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Wonder, eroticism and enigma," in *Sexuality and identity*, Hendrick M. Ruitenbeek (ed.), New York: Dell, 1970, pp. 13ff., as summarised in James Nelson, *Between two gardens: reflections on sexuality and religious experience*, Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1983, pp. 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Nelson, *Between two gardens ...*, p. 74.

Nelson's 'new paradigm' accepts sexuality as a contributor to our spirituality, both personally and corporately.

The concept of vocation is a valuable aspect of the relationship between sexuality and Christian spirituality. James Hannigan suggests that,

... human sexuality is a basic pointer to the vocation or calling every person receives from God to lead a life of love in the particular circumstances of one's world. The specific form we give to our sexuality, that is to say the way of life from which our sexual behaviors derive their meaning, is to be understood as a concrete specification of the vocation ...<sup>8</sup>

Vocation is something one both receives and carries out, both gift and task. As gift, it is a calling freely initiated by God, to whom a response must be made. As task, it implies a mission and service to be accomplished. A vocation is both a profoundly personal matter and a social reality with ethical implications in community life.<sup>9</sup>

Marriage, Hannigan says, is called to be a vocation, a way of life that is a life of service. Sexual union ritualises and confirms a life shared in love and embraced as God's calling. It embodies and celebrates. It brings to physical expression the spiritual reality that it symbolises - the joining together of two lives as one.<sup>10</sup> In *Homosexuality: a test case for Christian sexual ethics*, Hannigan goes on to apply this vocational aspect of sexuality as a moral criterion, arguing that a homosexual relationship cannot fully express the symbolic realisation of vocation.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not this is the case, the idea of vocation is helpful in understanding sexuality as part of our spirituality.

We believe humans to be created in the image of God yet we do not understand God to be sexual. For sexuality involves embodiment in physical flesh.<sup>12</sup> True sexuality, involving as it does a capacity for the most intimate communion, may nevertheless be seen as a reflection of the divine capacity for intimate communion. In the first creation account (Genesis 1) sexuality is part of the world, part of the way humans become a living species in the created order. Sexual humans are created in the image of God, yet in the earth. In the second account (Genesis 3), the sexuality is

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<sup>8</sup> James P. Hannigan, *Homosexuality: the test case for Christian ethics*. - New York: Paulist Pr., 1988, p. 89.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91ff.

<sup>12</sup> It is thus axiomatic that Jesus was sexual.

expressed in the relationship between a man and a woman. It expresses companionship and sharing.<sup>13</sup>

Several of the most important New Testament passages dealing with issues of sexuality appeal to the creation stories in Genesis, affirming that in the new creation - the life of faith - sexuality is neither inconsequential nor done away with. In the New Testament passages, human sexuality is seen as a continuance of God's good creation. It is only in perversions expressed in actual behaviour that there is any connection of sexuality with the Fall.<sup>14</sup> Sexual questions are resolved in the light of the goodness of God's creation of humans as sexual beings, male and female. Both New Testament and Old Testament perspectives reinforce that sexuality is part of what it means for us to be created in the image of God (notwithstanding that we can say nothing of God's self as being sexual). Scripture does *not* say that, "in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them, except for their sexuality"! If human sexuality is intrinsically good, being part of the creation in God's image, it seems reasonable that our sexuality may be part of our quest for a fulfilled and authentic Christian existence - our Christian spirituality. Not merely may our sexuality, and its expression in sexual conduct, be influenced by our developing spirituality, but *vice versa*.

#### IV

The dilemma posed by our topic is to understand how this relationship between human sexuality and human spirituality is also related to Christian identity. What in the sexuality-spirituality relationship would make it peculiarly Christian in character? Can the relationship between our spirituality and our sexuality contribute to us "seeing the glory of the Lord ... being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor. 3:18)?

One response to this question is to define Christian identity in sexual matters in terms of norms of conduct. Principles of right sexual conduct may be reduced to the

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<sup>13</sup> Richard E. Whitaker, "Creation and human sexuality" in *Homosexuality and Christian community*, Seow Choon-Leong (ed.), Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996, pp.3-13, at p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ulrich W Mauser, "Creation and human sexuality in the New Testament" in *Biblical ethics and homosexuality: listening to scripture*, Robert L. Brawley (ed.), Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996, pp. 3-16.

questions, "What acts are permissible?" and "With whom are they permissible?"<sup>15</sup>

A view that certain sexual *acts* are moral or immoral may be based on either consequentialist grounds or non-consequentialist grounds. Among the latter is a resort to natural law, employing the notion that some kinds of act are unnatural and therefore wrong. Two problems arise. First, the mere fact that an act is not conducive to reproduction does nothing to show that it is unnatural, that it is behaviour abnormal to human beings. Secondly, the fact that an action is unnatural does not thereby make it immoral without a further premise such as the Catholic belief that what is contrary to nature is wrong because it is contrary to the will of the Creator.

A further approach to right sexual conduct is to condemn acts that fail to treat those with whom they are performed, or oneself, as persons rather than objects. This approach is influential but requires additional arguments to show that depersonalised sex is morally impermissible, leading to the question of *with whom* one may morally experience sexual relations. There are many possibilities for the *with whom* question, which might be summarised as follows:<sup>16</sup>

<i>Sex restricted to:</i>	<i>excludes (among others):</i>	<i>and draws on</i>
marriage partners	same-sex partners	ethics of duty
those in love	casual sex	ethics of care
those desired and loved as persons	prostitution	ethics of virtue
consenting adults	children, animals, those incapable of informed consent (because of incapacity or coercion)	

The traditional Christian view is among the most stringent of responses to the *with whom* question. Introducing a selection of readings on Christian sexual ethics, the editors of the anthology *From Christ to the world*,<sup>17</sup> characterise traditional Christian moral teaching on marriage as follows:

- (1) one should refrain from sexual activity until marriage (i.e., the wedding);
- (2) an essential and normal purpose of marriage is to produce children;
- (3) one should refrain from sexual activity with anyone but one's spouse;
- (4) one should choose a spouse from the opposite sex; and

<sup>15</sup> This the following paragraph based on Paul Gilbert, "Sexual morality" in *The Oxford companion to philosophy*, Ted Honderich (ed.), Oxford: OUP, 1995, pp. 824-5.

<sup>16</sup> Ideas sourced from Paul Gilbert, *op.cit.*, p. 825.

<sup>17</sup> *From Christ to the world: introductory readings in Christian ethics*, Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey (eds), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

(5) the marital estate is intended to be a permanent love relationship.<sup>18</sup>

The editors note that "debates rage around each of these mandates"<sup>19</sup>, particularly in industrialised societies.

A concern of those proposing a non-traditional Christian view of sexual relationships is that the traditional view does not take into account the good often involved in sexual relationships other than marriage. If such good is possible, why not allow it morally? If the traditional teaching is Christ's command, Philip Turner argues,<sup>20</sup> then we must say sexual relationships other than in marriage are simply disobedient. Yet, even from a 'traditional' perspective we may recognise that good can be found in a loving, possibly 'committed' relationship outside marriage. Therefore, we should acknowledge that a person moving away from such a relationship for the sake of an obedient conscience might suffer the loss of a much-desired and much needed good.<sup>21</sup> The expectation of faith is that God comforts, heals and restores, but we should not suppose that all sexual relationships outside traditional marriage are devoid of positive spiritual content and value.

Almost any system of rule-based sexual ethics uses criteria other than godly love (or the absence of it) to limit one's potential sexual partners. When employed by Christians, such a system also limits the potential relationships through which one's spirituality might be expressed in association with sexual intimacy. Though there may be social expedients for such a system, it is difficult to accept such a code of inclusion and exclusion, a system of law, as the best way to characterise truly Christian *identity* in the relationship between spirituality and sexuality.

## V

J. Gaden pointedly reminds us that,

Our identity as Christians ultimately does not rest on any thing that we do, but in our being called by Christ through the Spirit into an intimate relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters. Who we are arises fundamentally out of who God is and who God calls us to be.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 319.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> In discussing this point, I am drawing on Philip W. Turner as excerpted in reading 62 in *From Christ to the world ...*, pp. 359-362.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 362.

<sup>22</sup> J. Gaden, "Appendix: a Christian discussion on sexuality" in *A theology of the human person*, M. Rodgers and M. Thomas (eds), Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1992, pp. 83-100 at p. 93.

Our identity, Gaden points out, is eschatological. Christ calls people out of their existing relationships to become his disciples, transcending racial, social and sexual distinctions (Gal.3.28). "Like everything else, our sexuality is to be shaped by and find fulfilment in God's kingdom of right and just relationships".<sup>23</sup> In the Gospels, Jesus appears to have had little interest in sex. But he was affectionate, emotional and relaxed in intimate dealings with women and men. "In reality Jesus demonstrates a sexuality fully integrated with his person in the service of the kingdom," Gaden suggests.<sup>24</sup> Yet, we do not know how difficult it may have been for Jesus to achieve this, as "one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin." (Hebrews 4.15).<sup>25</sup>

In his sexuality, as in all things, Jesus fulfilled the law rather than being enslaved by it - the law that he epitomised in two great commandments of love. Those who seek to walk by faith are challenged to embody these commandments in their relationships. Augustine's maxim, "Love and do what you will"<sup>26</sup> comes to mind. The identifying Christian characteristic in matters of sexuality, as in all things, is love.

If love is the central (albeit not the only) norm for Christian ethics, it is the central meaning of human sexuality and the measuring standard and justification for any particular sex act. Nevertheless, the word is dangerously slippery, and countless dehumanizing acts have been done in the name of love.<sup>27</sup>

The challenge, therefore, is to find content for our understanding of love. This content is found in Scripture and in the traditions of the Christian community, in our understanding of God's loving dealings with humankind.<sup>28</sup> "Ethics centred in this kind of love", James Nelson asserts, "will be neither legalistic nor antinomian".<sup>29</sup>

(However, a discussion in detail of Christian understanding of love is beyond the scope of this essay.) If we are to understand our sexuality through the principle of love, we must allow our faith to overcome fear of our sexuality. Paul Gilbert suggests that the application of various ethical systems limiting one's choice of sexual partner,

...is a reaction to viewing sex as a potentially disruptive force - disruptive, respectively, to society at large so that exceptionless formal restrictions need to be imposed; to

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> A point made in class discussion at St. Mark's.

<sup>26</sup> "Dilige et quod vis fac" Augustine of Hippo, *Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* (413CE), tractatus 7, sect. 8.

<sup>27</sup> Nelson, *Between two gardens ...*, p. 82.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-81

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p. 84.

personal relationships, so that sex must be tied to concern for another's welfare; and to the individuals themselves whose integrity as persons is put at risk by it.<sup>30</sup>

As Nelson notes, "the tendency towards legalism seems stronger in sexual morality and in virtually any other arena of human behaviour".<sup>31</sup>

Contemporary debate within the church concerning sexuality arises partly from an understanding that our rules sometimes fail to respond to sexuality in a way that expresses not fear, but love and faith. Together, we struggle to express the principle of love that must be the identifying mark of the relationship between sexuality and Christian spirituality.

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<sup>30</sup> Gilbert, *op.cit.*, p. 825.

<sup>31</sup> Nelson, *Between two gardens* ..., p. 81.