

THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST I

CHRIST AND SEXUALITY

UNDER THE umbrella title of 'The Humanity of Christ' I propose to discuss two subjects: 'Christ and Sexuality' and 'Christ and Anxiety'.¹

I ought perhaps to apologize for the title of this first article.² A few years ago, it would certainly have seemed shocking and irreverent. Even today it contains an element of challenge; but it is a challenge that I think we ought to try and meet. Connections between theology, spirituality and psychology can no longer be neglected.³

Until recently, what the gospels had to say about the humanity of Jesus satisfied us well enough. The baby, the child, the adolescent (mostly hidden) and the grown adult made their regular appearances in our liturgical and prayer calendar. Each time one of those figures came round, it was a familiar *alter ego*. But it was an *alter ego* with an occasional touch of unreality. There was one question a priest might hear in counselling or in the confessional, and it ran like this: 'How can I pray to, or model myself upon, even expect understanding and sympathy from, a sexless Jesus? Unless he knows my difficulties from within, it is unreal and even useless for you to propose him to me as friend, or model, or forgiving Saviour'. Today the question often has to be met in the form of a flat denial of faith. 'If your Jesus was as sexless as the Church has presented him, then he is just not normal, not human'.⁴ The situation is a serious one. Jesus was, it is true, proposed as an *alter ego*, because he was fully human; but some may now believe, that when it comes to the all-important question of sexuality Jesus apparently cannot help them.

Richard Egenter puts his finger on one factor we should not neglect.⁵ The

¹ Both contributions will be, in fact, a continuation of my article 'The Man for All Seasons', in *The Way* (April 1974), p 129-140.

² In 1951, that much respected spiritual authority, Père Bruno de Jésus-Marie still wrote apologetically and, as he mentioned, with an eye on the then Mgr Ottaviani of the Holy Office. See his 'St Jean de la Croix et la Psychologie Moderne', in *Études Carmélitaines* (Paris, 1951), pp 9-24.

³ 'The psychology of religion is in its early stages as an independent scientific discipline and there is immense scope for development'. D. Stollberg, in the *Encyclopædia of Psychology*, vol 3 (eds H. J. Eysenck, W. Arnold, R. Meili, London, 1972), p 139.

Antoine Vergote, *Psychologie Religieuse* (Brussels, 1966) can be much recommended as a reflective introduction from a catholic source.

⁴ Cf Robinson John A. T.; *The Human Face of God* (London, 1973), esp. pp 56ff, 63ff, 80.

⁵ Cf *The Desecration of Christ*, (trans E. Quinn, London, 1967), pp 77-8. Egenter's symptomatology of the Our Lady of Lourdes statues is almost certainly not exhaustive. I would see the symbol also, if not primarily, as a bright figure of light which is (a) a diurnal symbol of ascent and thus divides good from bad, pure from impure, healthy

complaining believer, for one, is reacting against the artistic sentimentalizing of the figure of Jesus, a process which is very much in need of analysis. Think of Holman Hunt's *The Light of the World*. Think of the mass-produced statues of the Sacred Heart, tasteless, poor-spirited and above all sexless objects. The observation even holds good for the vastly popular and brilliantly meretricious painting, *The Christ of St John of the Cross* by Dali. Popular piety had until recently been fed for about one hundred and fifty years upon *Kitsch* – an art style you do not define, but you do recognize it. Religious *Kitsch*, especially catholic versions of it, litter the planet. It is of course different from *folk-art* or *pop*, in which life and vigour are sustained. The social effects of *Kitsch* need to be studied, and its implicit effect upon sexuality. *Kitsch* is weak, save in two respects. It encourages submission and obedience, and it is strong in repressing or infantilizing sex, which is different from sublimating it. It has been unmistakably powerful and popular. We must not forget that in religious houses such statues were for decades the object of regular private, if not community, *cultus*.

I see the question of *Kitsch* as a particular, but common, condition which introduces us to more general problems. It must do so because as a religious conditioner it is meant to affect the individual subject as a whole. These 'pious' objects were meant to encourage our 'zeal', our 'sorrow for sin', our 'love of the rule', our 'desire for the missions'. These are orientations for the whole person; and, as with religious objects generally, they are normative and prescriptive: in that the example embodied in the object is held up as a pattern for conduct.⁶ It is clear that individual as well as social sexuality were, and are, involved in such a situation. They were involved in the variety of lily-bearing statues, and indeed in the many sexual ambiguities implicit in the *Kitsch* versions of the Sacred Heart.⁷ Modesty powder and special garments for the bath are still within living memory of convent life. The use of chains and disciplines has been entirely reconsidered in non-monastic orders and congregations; but that still leaves the problem of co-existence among generations of religious whose outlook and 'formation' now differ widely. Religious, who have to move freely in the sex-permeated atmosphere of the city, are aware as never before of a pseudo-ideology of sex, through advertising and the mass media, which is in conflict with an ideology of chastity that has yet to be rebuilt *as an ideology*. Until then, *Kitsch*, with its drained humanity and hidden violence, will remain suspect.

Herzog, quoted by Egenter, is of course right when he points to the strong

from diseased, and (b) as the euphemization (that is, making benign) the otherwise dark, chthonic, threat of the feminine with which religion also has to come to terms. The legend above the statue, *Je suis l'Immaculée Conception*, tends to confirm both these observations.

⁶ Much of Egenter's reasoning seems to me to be on the right lines: cf especially ch.V, 'The Breeding Ground of Kitsch and its Moral Effects' and Ch. VI, 'Moral Ineptitude as the Heart of Kitsch'.

⁷ Readers of Josefa Menéndez, *The Way of Divine Love* (Westminster, Md., 1965), will remember how such ambiguities abound there.

subconscious influences of sex on the most widespread pieces of *Kitsch*. Our Lady of Lourdes, or the Immaculate Conception, 'here almost always appears as a sweet girl, more precisely a curious combination of courtesan and goddess, for these images make nothing of Mary, the Mother of God . . . but rather the feminine part of man's soul – still in a primitive state – his undifferentiated anima'.⁸ The particular theory behind these remarks does not matter. What does matter by way of introduction to our theme is that *Kitsch* is an expression of a totally inadequate response to the christian faith. In its weakness it displays fear of total doctrine, here the maternity of Our Lady. In its hidden violence it flees from independent and mature moral decision; hence also from grace. In its fear of the human body and of sexuality it is patently docetic in tendency. It preaches and teaches a Jesus who was not even recognizably human.

I

The situation is not as well-established as it was; and from time to time one can hear extravagant reactions, which do not help us in our main task. Our commitment is to confirming others in their faith in Christ. If, in some merely secular fashion, we were simply trying to restore to honour some historical lay-figure more or less accurately portrayed, we could then afford to be disinterested in how he was represented. We could afford such an attitude, so long as it did not interfere with a substantial loyalty to the institution in question. Whether even then we should be so disinterested is another matter. But we christians take it upon ourselves to go so far as to aid in the search for a mystic counterpart to the individual believer, a counterpart who will be thought of as the object of the believer's whole unitive life, and in whom he will, so far as may be, come to be totally absorbed. We dare to hope as we busy ourselves with our apostolate, that the motivation of our fellow-believers will be determined by the Jesus they find in this spiritual and in some degree mystic union. We will insist on the necessity of learning from him, of listening to his inspiration at all times, and indeed of being so conformed to him, that he becomes a kind of control in our lives. We will be satisfied when we hear of the need which is felt for the spiritual *alter ego*, or *spouse*, especially in the celibate believer's life. We shall recommend that a certain presence of Jesus be felt in the community so that it may remain at peace with itself in face of any form of external aggression. It is true that, since we are ourselves believers, we shall by the same token absolve ourselves from any suspicion of 'manipulating' others through the type of Jesus-figure we present, since we are convinced that in our sincere obedience to gospel and tradition we are entirely guided by an objective state of affairs.

That last phrase could obviously be discussed at length, but would take

⁸ Cf Egenter: *The Desecration of Christ*, p 77-8.

us too far away from the present subject. It is enough to say that there is no way of helping the brethren except through the various religious and cultural environments in which we encounter them. We can do no other but start with our own cultural equipment and use what means of creative criticism we possess. That is why I mentioned *Kitsch* to begin with. It would be good to think that, though we may have to give way to *folk* or *pop* in religious art, and perhaps in theology, we need never again give way to *Kitsch*. We cannot in fact continue to disseminate it, and at the same time not be conscious of 'manipulation', once we have seen something for ourselves of the critiques of psychological anthropology (that is, the overlapping interests of psychology and anthropology) and cultural psychiatry (that is, the relationship between socio-cultural factors and emotional disorder, or emotional organization in general).

But if progress has been slow, that is partly because in the catholic Church we have dragged our feet. When the practice of psycho-analysis became generalized, and while the chief works of the freudian corpus were making their appearance, a negative reaction took place. As Michel Meslin remarks, we were first treated to a violent denunciation of freudian materialism. Then, in so far as freudianism made an impact as a coherent theory it was declared to be unacceptable reductionism of the christian faith. Polemic was shocked and vigorous. The danger seen in psycho-analysis seemed, however, to diminish when priests and nuns appeared to benefit from treatment. The polemic cooled off; but, and this is the important point for us here, it still seemed quite impossible 'that the love which a believer had for his God could, in the slightest degree, depend upon his urges or his sexuality'.⁹ It is here that the question of sexuality in our Christ-faith and Christ-devotion has to be thought through with tranquillity. I quote Meslin again: 'it is clear that after Freud, "believing" (or "living the life of faith", *croire*) no longer means exactly what it had meant before'.¹⁰

I suggest that at first sight the problem breaks down into *four areas*, though they overlap, especially *areas one* and *two*. *Area one* has to do with the question whether or not we can make any historical statements about sexuality in the life of Jesus. *Area two* is concerned with statements of our historic faith about Jesus, when we say, preach and teach that he was concretely thus and thus in his life on earth, or is concretely thus and thus as the risen and eternal Christ. *Area three* concerns the meaning of the humanness of Jesus *for us* in our faith; that is to say, the meaning, that on reflection and interpretation, we think he ought to have for us, rather than the meanings which may be foisted on him. *Area four* has to remain a programmatic and interpretative one. We are still at the stage of reviewing the questions which have to be explored, rather than coming up with a set of answers.

⁹ Cf Meslin, Michel: *Pour Une Science des Religions* (Paris, 1973), p 122.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 123.

II

Area one can here be dealt with shortly. It asks the question, 'Did the Nazarene prophet-carpenter, called Jesus, have a sex-life like ours?' The question obviously begs a number of others, but Bishop John Robinson settles the matter satisfactorily for our purposes:

In all this, of course, the issue is not what historical remarks we can confidently make about Jesus of Nazareth. The answer is quite clearly, None. We do not know anything for certain about his sex-life. As Dennis Nineham has reminded us, the gospels 'do not even think to tell us definitely whether or not he was married', though a book has recently appeared with the title *Was Jesus Married?*, which is not in fact as mad as it sounds. The gospels do not exist to provide answers to these questions.¹¹

There is really no difficulty with the arguments against saying that Jesus was married. First, the gospels say nothing about it. Secondly, the anti-erotic bias of the New Testament churches came early into christianity; and we can suppose that if Jesus had been married that tendency would have been checked, or at least that there would be some sign of dissent. Lastly, when Paul invoked his *right* 'to be accompanied by a wife (Greek, *sister as wife*), as the other apostles, and brothers of the Lord and Cephas', any tradition that Jesus had been married would have clinched the point he was making.¹² (I tend to think there is something in this last argument, though catholic exegetes have in the past preferred to suppose that Paul was maintaining his right to subsidiary female help; translate then, *woman as religious sister*.)

It is hard to see that much more can be said about *area one*. Questions like these: What was the emotional stance that Jesus took towards the women in his life? Could he have had latent homo-sexual affects? Was his relationship with his mother satisfactory from the point of view of his emotional development? Had he, as is not rare in religious figures, no trace of an Oedipus complex? Such questions certainly do not belong to my *area one*.¹³

III

Area two is more complicated. Mainline christianity, in its statements of

¹¹ Cf Robinson, John A. T.: *The Human Face of God*, p 56. The references are to D. E. Nineham, *St Mark* (London, 1963) p 35, and William A. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* (New York, 1970).

¹² *Ibid.*, p 56, n 92.

¹³ Statements about the love of Jesus for Mary, Martha and Lazarus do not necessarily belong to my *area one*. One could write about Jesus in the way that Père Bruno de Jésus-Marie does about St John of the Cross: 'son energie vibrante . . . sa sexualité diraient les psychanalystes - féconde les contacts humain à l'avantage du Seigneur'. In the same article there is a short report by a graphologist which speaks of: St John's 'capacity for love'; and that he 'appears to have experienced everything and to have reacted to it'; also of 'ardour without aggression' (cf *art. cit.* pp 15-16). None of this could be *area one*.

faith in Jesus, has held to an historical Jesus; and in its high-point, Chalcedon, it held that the historical Jesus was 'co-essential' or 'consubstantial' with us. Nicaea had already said he was 'co-essential' or 'consubstantial' with the Father. It is worth noting that at the time of Chalcedon the commoner phrase was 'co-essential' or 'consubstantial' *with Mary*. The 'historicalness' and reality of this particular man Jesus is thus brought out strongly by his singular and individuating relationship with Mary. But in its stand against Eutyches, the Council went further. Eutyches had already agreed that Christ 'was from the flesh of the Virgin and that he was Perfect Man'. Now the council demanded that Eutyches commit himself to saying: 'If the mother is *co-essential with us*, [Christ] is also. . .'¹⁴ There was an implication here which Eutyches could not face, namely that Jesus was fully co-essential with us.

The hesitations of Eutyches survived him, and as late as 1442 the credal section of the Decree for the Jacobites insisted that Christ was *passible*.¹⁵ The common view was that he *took on* corporal infirmities such as hunger, fatigue, pain and death. But those were, so to speak, 'clean' infirmities. Diseases were different. Theology and medicine get mixed up in St Thomas's view of the matter. For him disease has to be excluded from the list of Christ's possible infirmities, because diseases are partly caused by original sin and sometimes by the fault of the individual, such as inordinate eating habits.¹⁶ It was also common doctrine that as a human being Christ was not ignorant, that he did not sin, indeed that he was radically incapable of sin. All that is a *second area* picture of Christ. And, as we noticed, the contemporary world-view, including the medieval idea of what constituted human perfection as well as health, were contributory factors. One cannot ask of a world-view that it shall be in advance of its time.

After the Reformation and the Enlightenment, theologians had to struggle and are still struggling to produce a picture of Christ which is humanly credible. Here, it is enough for us to satisfy ourselves that there is ground for hope that they will one day succeed. Why? The answer is in part a methodological one. Just because *area two* statements are different from *area one* statements, there is room for manoeuvre without disloyalty to the gospel truth about Jesus. *Area two* gives room for manoeuvre because, as we can now see, different thought-models in that area are not only legitimate but necessary.¹⁷ But we need not fear that such models and their implications are merely an excogitated mental spin-off of our own. The New Testament itself carries within it a variety of christologies, as is now generally accepted.

¹⁴ Cf Bindley T. H. and Green, F. W.: *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith* (London, 1950), p 196, note to line 113.

¹⁵ The Council of Florence, *Decr. pro Jacob.*, 'passibilis et temporalis ex conditione assumpta'. Denzinger-Schönmeister, 1337.

¹⁶ For St Thomas, Christ could not have had leprosy or a fatal disease. Cf *Summa Theologica* III, 14, 4.

¹⁷ On thought models in Christology see John McIntyre, *The Shape of Christology* (London, 1966).

They complete each other of course, and are not in contradiction. We thus find that *area two* overlaps within and without the limits of New Testament thinking. In seeking to correlate our views of man and the world with those of the New Testament writers, we thus have an open-ended situation on both sides. But what we have to respect, and where the danger signals will be hoisted, is in those places where the New Testament writers have a better hold on *area one* than we have, when they make *area two* statements. We cannot go behind that.

There is at present no ready-made *area two* set of conclusions about the sexuality of Christ, or indeed of the psychic background of the beliefs of the early churches in Christ. All the data of the problem cannot be satisfied. But the open-endedness we have mentioned is encouraging in a situation which contains many a paradox. Professor C. F. D. Moule opens up one of them for us. It is the paradox of the human 'continuity and discontinuity' in Jesus. According to the New Testament writers, the *humanity* of Jesus is both 'continuous and discontinuous from the rest of mankind'.¹⁸ As being the entire human race, as 'this man', as the 'new man', the 'sinless' man, even in the language of the New Testament he is discontinuous with the human race. How then should we see this in terms of the emphatic statements implying continuity? Moule does not say, for example, that Jesus could never have 'looked lustfully on a woman'. He does say that the sinless side of Jesus is in play because 'the set of the will will negate what might have been looking lustfully on woman'. Here is an *area two* argument (in part conditioned by historic New Testament faith, in part conditioned by a theory of the human will), which attempts to supply for a blank among the *area one* statements. The result remains at the stage of an open-ended paradox.

How does that affect us? It means, I think, that statements of historic faith from any period of our doctrinal history still leave us with a task of interpretation. We have to interpret the humanness of Jesus not by means of an ancient instrument from some museum of psychology appropriate to New Testament, patristic or medieval times, and not in the long run with some mint-new instrument of our own day (though in the short term I see no reason why that should be neglected, if it helps). What we have to interpret is the humanness of Jesus as a religious symbol. It must emerge as a symbol that speaks and 'gets through'. I quote Meslin again:

..... it is absolutely evident that today we can no longer talk of symbols in merely historico-cultural terms. If, as Ricoeur rightly felt, the symbol gives us ground for operational thinking, then there is all the more reason to find out why and how we can make the transition *from our analysis of the properly human symbolizing function to the*

¹⁸ Cf Moule, C. F. D.: 'The Manhood of Jesus in the New Testament', in *Christ, Faith and History* (eds S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton, Cambridge, 1972), p 102 (my italics).

result of the operation which man forever practises in the different cultures.¹⁹

To put that into the terms of our problem we can say this. We know Jesus as Saviour, Redeemer, King, Teacher, Shepherd, Mystic Bridegroom, Sacred Heart and Infant Jesus of Prague. At any rate we think we do. But none of those symbols is native to us today. We know that with some of them we can make the transition of which Meslin speaks. We do not advert too closely to the difference between those that do work, and those that do not; and, perhaps worse, we have not specifically inquired why Saviour and Shepherd apparently do make the transition, while Sacred Heart now does so less, and Infant Jesus of Prague hardly at all. To keep the right symbols alive we must know what we are doing from the human end: that is, we must have a sexually *intelligible* Jesus, if the *transition* is to be made to the 'properly human symbolizing function'. The idea of sexual intelligibility rather than the idea of mere sexual similarity seems to me to be the relevant one. We shall come back to this. In the meantime let us open up the question of *area three*.

IV

Area three could be labelled *his humanness and us*. It is the area in which we must try and take a stand, whilst it draws on the New Testament. The Jesus of the New Testament, we must remind ourselves, even when its theologies are highly post-resurrectional, was *a man* with a genetic history, a biological and psychological history interacting with other human beings. Even his most glorious-sounding titles relate to one who should make sense to us, in so far as the meanings of these titles are enfleshed in his concrete existence. That existence attracts and polarizes us, even though its inner psychological drives and structures are largely concealed from us.

In trying to make up our minds about the religious meaning for us of the problem of Jesus and sexuality, we must after all look for a soberly religious answer which is governed by the New Testament. It will incidentally be necessary to see whether we continue to put anything in brackets, and to state why we do so. So first of all a general remark: from all our evidence concerning the religious movements of first-century Palestine, one thing is clear, namely that any religious teacher or leader showing the slightest sign of 'permissiveness' could never have become plausible, and attracted a following. On any sane interpretation of the historical tradition surrounding Jesus of Nazareth, he was both popular and plausible. Fasting and the desert played a part in his life; and as a result he could afford to shrug off the efforts at a smear campaign against him. In the company he kept he ensured that his respect for the law should not interfere in any bigoted fashion with his social relationships. His respect for human beings contradicted the

¹⁹ Cf Meslin, M.: *Pour une Science des Religions*, pp 203-4.

tendency of his time to relegate women to an inferior status.²⁰ As Dodd says of the passage on the woman taken in adultery: 'Compassion for the woman is no less marked than scorn for her accusers, but the final words have an astringency which rules out any suggestion of 'permissiveness'.²¹ All that we shall ever know in a direct factual way is that indeed he was not 'permissive'.

Now that fits in with the rest, for sex obviously was then, as it still is, a central religious issue. It is true that there have been times in the history of the Church, when a horror of the flesh has obscured Christ's role as healer, de-alienator and Lord of a man's body. That does not fit the New Testament view and will not do as a genuine *area three* view of Christ. But still there are factual blanks about the New Testament Jesus, as we know him. We should not forget that in some ways we know him best as a teacher. As a teacher he could be stricter than his religious opponents. When he held that divorce and oaths were sinful, he was stricter than strict Jewish practice. 'We should not get a true picture of him if we failed to hear people who were shocked by his severity exclaim, Who then can be saved?'²² But when all that is said, we should remember also that it is a Jesus who takes his own line that we hear as a teacher. Only minimally does he engage in casuistry. In general he appears as a religious liberator. But, for our purpose, in what sense a liberator? 'Permissiveness' has been excluded; and it has never been shown that 'permissiveness' is a genuine and human form of liberation anyway. But he must be a religious liberator even in respect of sex. In what sense? I think he does *two* things both as teacher and healer: (a) he *liberates from* sin, where sin, a religious matter, is involved; and (b) he *liberates for* love of God, our Father, *for* love of the brethren, and *for* the realization of the project of self which is disclosed in him. To the modern that may seem restrictive and in part mythological. But, if *area three* reflections are to keep their New Testament aspect, that is the only honest answer. From a broader theological standpoint also we must say the same; for, while with the bible and much of Christian tradition we can see an overlap between sex and sin, we cannot possibly see an overlap between love (in the religious and profound sense) and sin.

To go back to speculation about Jesus himself, what we say excludes any possibility that Jesus could be alienated from himself. Lostness from God in Jesus would contradict the New Testament and all our understanding of it. Are we then definitely excluding anything which must find its place within the sphere of what constitutes man? Did he then possess that dark, irrational area of existence in which, and even more through which, we grow in grace?

²⁰ Cf an excellent section in Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (London, 1969), pp 359ff; and esp. p 356 for a summary of the attitude of Jesus. 'Jesus was not content with bringing women up onto a higher plane than was then the custom; but as Saviour of all (Lk 7, 36-50), he brings them before God on an equal footing with men' (Mt 21, 31-32).

²¹ Cf Dodd, C. H.: *The Founder of Christianity* (London, 1973), p 58.

²² Cf Käsemann, Ernst: *Jesus Means Freedom* (London 1969), p 23.

I think he did, and I think that such an opinion can legitimately be made within *area three* and its regard for the New Testament. If he was hungry, thirsty, sad, ignorant, and liable to that crisis in mind and resolve which is implied by Gethsemane, then he was not a stranger to the dark, irrational region.

Here it would be easy to embark upon a guessing game, but it must be excluded. We can reflect rather upon the consistency of his non-aggressive attitudes where his personal interests are concerned. (His zeal for his Father is another matter, for it is that of the authentic adult collaborating with God, rather than appropriating him, and there is no doubt as to where Jesus's ideal lies.) His inner concentration seems positive and relates to something which has to be said or done later on. And, if we add to that the consistent balance of Jesus in his relationship with women, we can say that we have a convergence of signs which suggest that in him we can see a very high degree of successful adjustment to reality.²³ Now, if I am asked, does that not mean that *area three* has simply brought us back to the plaster and paint of *Kitsch* with which we started, I am bound to reply, No.

V

Let us now move away from the three areas discussed and try in *area four* to reach some tentative interpretations which will keep what we have said in mind. Any interpretation must be religious. It is not enough to say that, as Jesus showed no signs of guilt, anxiety, tension or aggressivity over sex, therefore he must be a suitable antidote to what we think are disorders in ourselves. Many schools of christian spirituality have proposed a doctrine of the imitation of Christ. We are not in a doctor fish situation, on any theory of grace or conformity with the divine exemplar. The effect he produces can therefore be neither magical nor automatic. Such an idea is not even a religious one.

In an obscure way it somehow underlies two opposed tendencies from which mainline christianity has had to recoil. We have on the one hand the prurient believers who have recoiled from the flesh, and on the other the reductionist humanist, who must at all costs see some measure of sex in the life of Jesus, so that we can all feel better on recognizing ourselves in him. It would seem that a similar psychological mechanism, the projection of guilt, is at work in each case. The mechanism is a device by which the afflicted can come to terms with the reality they need in their lives. It is, however, not compatible with the christian belief in Jesus. But the dilemma which such christian variants have tried to meet is relatively simple: *either* we feel so guilt-ridden in the experience of our own sex-lives or in being deprived of

²³ My friend and colleague, Robert Murray speaks of Christ 'who lived in celibacy but (mostly unusually for a rabbi of his time) in close friendship with women as well as with men . . .' Cf R. Murray, 'Spiritual Friendship', in *Supplement to the Way* 10, *Celibacy* (Summer 1970), pp 62-3.

sex, that we can only bring ourselves to worship an unreal *Kitsch*-type of Christ, or we are so sex-guilty that we must have a sex-laden or sex-joyous Christ as our own familiar surrogate. Neither position allows for the particular Nazarene carpenter, who is the historic figure of our worship. Making Jesus inhuman in the first alternative is as mistaken as making him, in the current vernacular, 'sexually normal'. The latter phrase is, in the sense intended, quite inapplicable to a religious leader such as Jesus was.

Such conjectures are also bad thinking about christianity. When we insist that the question of Jesus and sexuality is a religious one, we are not suggesting that it is religious in a merely individualistic way. Faith in a reality called Jesus of Nazareth is a faith in the context of historic believing communities. Nor, to find an easy solution to the problem, can we de-sacralize Jesus, and then weave a sexual fantasy around him. The larger context of belief in Jesus includes the phenomenon that sex and sin overlap, and that sex can symbolize sin.²⁴ We have to be cautious here. The symbol does not have to be the thing, and historically the connection between sex as a symbol and sin as a reality, has sometimes been stronger and sometimes weaker. There is no need to canonize the whole of the tradition. What we still need is an understanding of why the symbol works. There is a paradox here, for the Church has in fact stood firm against manicheism, catharism and jansenism, and has not denied that sex and the flesh are a human good. But on the other hand, where theology has so far feared to tread, has been over a principle of the greek Fathers about the reality of the humanity of Christ. *What was not assumed* (by Christ) *was not healed*, they held. Later theology never inquired if that was true of human sexuality.

This is where there is speculative work still to be done; and it must be done on a jointly human and religious stand. It is possible that the western sex ideologies of protest (for example, 'sexual politics'), and of a sexual-mystical character (the neo-freudian sex mystics of the 'sixties) will stimulate some genuine thinking on more realistic lines.²⁵

Today it is important, I think, to relate the general perplexities in this field to the basic gospel situation. The person of Christ and his message can more clearly convey to man what his potentiality is than can the do's and

²⁴ For a powerful example of such symbolism at work in the interpretation of the Fall narrative, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Temptation* (London 1966), who wrote: 'Unrestrained sexuality, like uncreative sexuality, is therefore destruction *par excellence*. Thus it is an insane acceleration of the Fall; it is self-affirmation to the point of destruction. Passion and hate, *tob* and *ra* . . . these are the fruits of the tree of knowledge' (p 79); and further, 'If the dogmatics of the Church saw the essence of sin in sexuality, this is not such nonsense as protestants have often said from the point of view of moralistic naturalism. The knowledge of *tob* and *ra* is originally not an abstract knowledge of ethical principles, but sexuality; i.e. a perversion of the relationship between persons' (p 80).

²⁵ Two chapters can be especially recommended in John Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man* (London 1970); ch 13, 'Perfection Renounced: the Dystopians' (pp 260-285), and ch 15, 'The New Mysticism: Paradise Now' (pp 304-327).

don't's of a morality which is in any case looked upon as shifting. There are several reasons for this. First a Christ-mysticism is a communicable reality. Such a mysticism is securely based, and, as the life of St Paul, its greatest propagandist, shows clearly, there is no need to lose touch with the reality principle in living out such a mysticism. In its acceptance, and even in the concomitant wish for death, there is an implicit acceptance of the fact that gross sex-deviationism is a pseudo-existence. In freudianism, the role of the death-wish is controverted. As one of the symbols of Christ-mysticism, it has an assured balancing role once it is projected through the cross onto a death shared with Christ. Here the ideal Son with whom we identify is accepted by his Father, and the perfect sublimation becomes an ontological as well as a psychological structure.

At the same time we are enabled to come to terms with the fact that there is no paradise now. Today's culture suffers much and struggles much to disguise that reality from itself. Sex and drugs are one formula. But against this, mainline christianity stands firm. It has no mystical form of a paradise-for-now to proclaim. The task is always to renew the gospel of growth in grace, love and union with God, and man and the world; but growth implies a term not reached. Hence there can be no human perfectibility which leads merely 'into that simple health that animals enjoy but not man'.²⁶ Christianity could obviously not say that; and even Freud held a much more sober view of perfection. On reflection, it was even more sober than the somewhat static or mechanical view of 'christian perfection', which, after debasing the dynamism of Aristotle, settled down to a snug existence in manuals of spiritual perfection. Freud rejected the view that it is even possible fully to free a person from internal conflicts to perfect him. But the mirage has long been with us and we have projected a schematic normality upon Jesus, which we know that we ourselves shall never attain. The really religious aspect of the matter should have told us that we were looking in the wrong direction. The Epistle to the Hebrews repeatedly associates the perfection of Jesus with his suffering and the resolution of his life crisis.²⁷ Here, if ever, we are talking about the concrete Ego of experience, which is also the concrete 'I' of everyday life. Here, in the realm of theological conclusions, we find ourselves much nearer to Jesus as healer. It is the concrete 'I' in sexual distress with which religion is concerned.

²⁶ Cf Brown, Norman O.: *Life Against Death* (London, 1959), p 311 quoted by Passmore, *The Perfectibility of Man*, p 305.

²⁷ In a much discussed text of Hebrews, Christ, the High Priest, is able to be compassionate with the weaknesses of the brethren: 'He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he is himself beset with weakness' (Heb 5, 2). The argument supposes that he has shared human misery and trials. It is especially the 'obedience' in his Passion which gives Christ's priesthood its perfection. 'He learned obedience through what he suffered' (5, 8; see also 2, 17-18 and 4, 14-16).

VI

The reason why we can involve the Jesus of our religion with the problem of sexuality in man must therefore be viewed along the line of person and personhood. Those who try and make Jesus a talisman or magic touchstone fail, because they take Jesus out of the context of religion. There are of course resemblances between sexual attitudes and religious attitudes. Sexual attitudes help to structure the person; and the believer and lover of God is none other than the concrete structured person. That does not mean that all sexual attitudes can be related to religious attitudes. Some are destructive. Oral sadism is in the end destructive of human love. Religious oral sadism of the Savonarola type is destructive by its bigotry and violence. Human sexual love, considered as a personal endowment, is quite different. In this perspective there is a vertical line transcending the finite human relationship: now sexual love relates through the *other* to the One, God our Father. This vertical line is surely disclosed in Jesus in such a way that sexual affectivity is neither distorted nor denied. That seems to me most important, and one must look for an illustration.

Jesus, after all, is liberator as well as healer. He promises that his yoke will be a light one.²⁸ That must hold good for sexuality as for the rest. In the first instance, Jesus liberates from the casuistical thralldom of the sabbath law. In that he shares his lordship with God.²⁹ The point is that it is precisely with God, our Father, that this lordship is shared. Authority is now taken away from the rabbis. Jesus is thus himself the liberator, and the one who is commanding Lord. But he gives an enabling command. The result therefore in the realm of human sexuality cannot be a licence for perversity as a form of liberation. It can only be the establishment of a relationship in sexuality which is open to the basic possibility of personal encounter, and through that to the possibility of the essentially religious relationship with the Father. That is how the enabling command must work out. 'The living Christ', said T. W. Manson, 'still has two hands, one to point the way and the other held out to help us along'.³⁰ Such a process is no form of sex homoeopathy. It is still, however, what this man Jesus does; and he does it as *a man*; that is, with all the characteristics of the race in compassion and love.

So we must reject the argument that only *like cures like*.³¹ I see nothing in

²⁸ Cf Mt 11, 30.

²⁹ Cf Mt 12, 8.

³⁰ Manson, T. W.: *Ethics and the Gospel* (London 1960) p 68.

³¹ The classic form of the principle of affinity is that *like seeks after like* (Aristotle): in theories of knowledge, *like is known by like* (Plato), and there is knowledge by *connaturality* (St Thomas). Almost as ancient is the principle that *contraries are cured by contraries* (Hippocrates), which supplements and forms a dialectic with the previous principle, and which had had its place in ascetical writing. For the theological relevance, see Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London 1974), pp 26-7; 30-31, nn 20-21. After a long and varied history, the principle of affinity comes down to us in astrology, which only parted company from medicine two centuries ago. Cf Naylor, P. I. H.: *Astrology, an Historical Examination* (London 1967), p 169.

well-considered christology which ought to make us think that the incarnation ought to be a sort of philosopher's stone for sex. If we turn again to St Paul, we can see that it is not *likeness*, but *sameness* on which he relies. For him the graced condition of any man, and, as we are talking about a personal relationship with God, *through our sexuality in a large or narrow sense*, that graced condition is a total negation of any human boast (*kauchésis*). The likeness of sex in Christ to heal sex in us is a human projection; in other words, it is our doing, not God's doing. Now the principle, already mentioned, that *what was not assumed was not healed* relies on *sameness*, not likeness, with us. Christ's consubstantiality or co-essentiality with us points, not to a situation within him of incoherence or perversity, but rather to the possibility of realized structuration. He is therefore not merely schematic normality. He is in his human structuration perfected personal love. The man, our Saviour, was the same as we are in the sameness of structured personality, in that which relates us as sons in the Son.

To anyone who says: 'Ah, but you have now put the question of sexuality in brackets and have forgotten it', I must honestly reply, *Yes* and *No*. *No* in the sense that the matter remains subsumed in the vertical line of personality, and in the sense that it is left *ad agonem*. At the same time, I must say, *Yes*, in the sense that crisis and struggle are the normal ways in which we think about sexuality from day to day. I have not suggested that liability to guilt, anxiety and aggressiveness are removed, nor that it is through those factors that our distress impinges upon us.

It is probably true that the element of aggressiveness is the one which appears to us to be the least compatible with our idea of Jesus as healer. It goes with domination and, when imposed, in any circumstances in which sadism may be suspected, can have no place in the perfected structuration of love, especially of love which involves the divine. Non-violence is surely of the essence of what we call the supernatural. We are here in an area of considerable ambivalence. The neurotic subject projects his inner conflict on his religious outlook and becomes socially aggressive. God or Christ will then always be ready to punish. There is no denying that sickness may lead in that direction. But for our present purpose this must remain another topic. In our line of thinking we have opted for the non-violence of moral strength and love to be found in the structures graced by Christ. What happens then to the aggressive element latent in sexuality. 'Aggressiveness', says Jean Lhermitte, 'can become the most effective motive in spiritual progress'.³²

Would that be true even in the area of Christ and sexuality? I take an illustration from the personal study of that massive and constructive theologian, Paul Tillich, written after his death by his psychiatrist friend, Rollo May. Paulus, as his friends called him, loved women sensually but not sexually. Nevertheless . . .

³² Lhermitte, Jean: 'Les Sentiments de Sympathie et d'Aggressivité', in *Amour et Violence; Études Carmélitaines* (1946), p 20.

He could talk about sexuality in public so long as it was not personal confession. And talk about it he did, with a frankness and honesty which stood out radically indeed in faculties where most professors spoke as if they had never heard the word sex. It was in Paulus' lectures that I first heard of the 'love bite', that moment of hostility and aggression which occurs at the climax of sexual intercourse. He believed that, even though partly aggressive, the sexual act in the orgasm is still a giving of the persons to each other. It is the tension between the aggressiveness and the giving which produces the ecstasy of sex. From Paulus I also heard of the 'union of opposites', of which sexual intercourse is a symbol – the straining of the totality of one person to become wholly absorbed in the other person.³³

What is said there can be taken as symbolic expression of what I am trying to suggest from a theological point of view. As we know from the Song of Songs and from many high points in history of mysticism, human love is a symbol of the divine-human encounter.³⁴ Our residual, but sublimated aggressiveness, may yet contribute to the 'union of opposites'. It would take us into a theology of the cross to show how this can be verified. For the moment let us return to the thought that in and through sexual tensions on the part of the believer, the offer of Christ is still for a mystic union of persons. St Paul had no hesitation about mixing Christ mysticism and sex to insist on the need for sublimation.³⁵ It is clear that the union in question excludes paradise now, the lapsing into perversity, and regression into infantilism. It would also be true, as I wrote in a sacramental context, 'that the use of such symbolism' [as that of sexual love] 'for the ordinary believer as for the mystic has to be accompanied by a sense and practice of sensual purification. There would be nothing odd in that. The christian as well as the freudian traditions recognize that there is always a role for Thanatos'.³⁶

VII

It may be felt that I have argued a severe view over the humanness of Christ and sexuality. If I do so, it is because I see no substitute for the objectivity of the Church's faith in Christ. Questions can be asked only about

³³ May, Rollo: *Paulus, a Personal Portrait of Paul Tillich* (London 1974), p 55.

³⁴ Besides St Bernard, William of St Thierry was a proponent of a mystical theology based upon the Song of Songs. The question is whether such a theology shows signs of the concept of a *pathos* in God. Condren for example can speak of 'Jesus Christ . . . offered . . . to the Father *also to be consummated in us*'. See Henry Bremond, *A Literary History of Religious Thought in France, III, The Triumph of Mysticism* (London, 1936), p 316 (my italics). There was of course such a notion as the intra-Trinitarian mystical kiss. Cf *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, III, 888ff.

³⁵ Cf 1 Cor 6, 15ff.

³⁶ von Balthasar, Hans Urs: *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation*. ch 6: 'Love as Revelation' sketches a *theologia crucis* for catholics which ends in the universality 'of both forms of death in Adam' and the universality of the divine mercy (cf Rom 11, 32).

the real, objective Jesus Christ of Church faith who was the Nazarene carpenter. Nor can any offer to relieve sufferers from anxiety, guilt, or an aggressiveness connected with sexuality be anything but a religious *placebo* unless it is grounded in the being of the Christ who was and is.

All that could be done here was to sketch a line of thought. Much remains to be worked out. The technical casuistry of the past concerning sex is no longer helpful and is falling into desuetude. Christians still ask for help in avoiding humanist reductionism, and from folk-lore concepts of guilt ranging from ritual impurity to socially secular transgressions. The holy touch view of Jesus was simply wrongly focussed on a not-given sex-factor in his life. It was equally unhelpful to concentrate exclusively on the all-pure sinlessness of Jesus at the expense of the far more communicable fact that his life was wholly one of humanly personal love. There is no need to think that our relationship with him is merely a psychological identification. It is far more. The force he communicates, the offer of surrender to God that he makes – all this adds up to the situation of a christiform grace-relationship. We can then say that the sex-liberation offered by Christ is to be freely embraced in the sublimating death-life of the cross. It is there that love speaks and discloses; it is there that we find communion in deed, and it is there that love, to use the language of von Balthasar, gives of itself as form.

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