

SEXUALITY AND THE CREATIVITY OF GOD

By ANN SMITH

'HERO: Fie upon thee. . . . Art not ashamed? MARGARET: Of what lady? Of speaking honourably? . . . An bad thinking do not wrest true speaking I'll offend nobody'.¹

GOOD CHRISTIANS, and decent people of any sort, are uncomfortable when talking about sex. This reluctance seems to be more than the veil we draw to protect something sacred. The age we live in is the age when sexuality has been 'discovered', defined in isolation from its social aspects, 'demythologized'. Sexual freedom has been one of many causes to inspire men and women, and perhaps the most far-reaching in its implications. As a Church we have stood out against what is, to an extent, the cause of our times, sometimes seeming almost proud to consign the flesh to the devil, just as the mediaeval Church seemed concerned to turn its back on the world. The insights of our time: for example Freud's intimations of sexuality as a great moulding and motivating force at the centre of individuality, or Lawrence's vision of the religious nature of physical passion, can still evoke shudders of abhorrence.

There are obvious ironies in a situation in which the Church treats as suspect any human urge for freedom. Here is an instinct which draws people together in love, the action of God the Creator. The dangers of such a reaction to sexuality are also obvious. We should not need to ask ourselves why our world often sees religion as irrelevant. Sadder still is the effect such an attitude has on the self-image of ordinary christian people. This deepest experience of life comes to be felt as something which, if not a matter for shame, has at least nothing to do with God and religion. The Church here is not making whole but helping to create, or at least confirm, that sense of division which drives man from God. If we cannot 'take' sexuality, neither can we fully accept ourselves or God.

Some people would argue that we are getting better. There are lots of good things said by the Church in praise of marriage. Nowadays,

we believe in giving our children instruction in human relationships. What about our talks for engaged couples? It is not in what we say but in what we fail to say that the odour of Manichaeism still lingers. Sexuality does not begin with the buying of the ring. To express that explosive physical force which rises through the sap of plants and trees and runs through the veins of animals and men merely in spiritual or even social terms is often to make it unrecognizable. The young child in a tantrum of frustration, the adolescent trekking miles to someone's party, the married couple moving to the beat of jazz music, feel something much more basic.

Divided nature and guilt

The feeling that this something basic is shameful, which makes us so ready to give and to accept blame, arises directly from the way our human nature develops. God gave us these warring elements. The divisions from which we suffer are necessary. That sense of division in our nature which we first experience as a loss of innocence has always centred around sexual awareness. Before they lost their happy garden the man and woman 'perceived themselves to be naked' (Gen 3,7). And so we mourn for that ideal of wholeness which we feel is our lost heritage, the simplicity of a nature untroubled by inner conflict, with reason firmly in control of instinct. With that lost and very literal paradise as a firm feature of our tradition, the Church has helped to confirm man's sense that he has deserved to lose it.

From the moment we experience the bitter taste of knowing more than is good for us and understand the suggestive nudge and wink, we feel ourselves 'fallen'. The first stirring of our sexual nature, which is felt as a guilty secret drawing us away from that happy unselfconscious tribal feeling (the single-minded family love), is in fact beginning to form us as individuals. Our sexual perceptions encompass both our basest instinct for self-gratification and our highest insights into the nature of God, who is love itself. We begin to know the heights and depths of which we are capable, and the feeling enhances the sense of hypocrisy. Yet what the loss of simplicity has brought us is the ability to make moral choices, and we do not like it.

Along with the sense of loss, therefore, comes sexual guilt which takes the form of a bitter sense of betrayal. If the instincts of our bodies are the power of God at work in us, drawing us out of self-gratification into love, and through love of others to the love of God

himself, then to appropriate those instincts for short-term lonely pleasures must seem the greatest treachery. It is the sin we find it hardest to forgive in others, especially our own children and nearest relatives. The words we use to describe the sins we commit in the name of love are not applied to other kinds of selfishness such as theft or cruelty or murder. It is the abuse of sexuality that we see as the betrayal of family and community, and thus reserve for it the term 'immorality'. The victorian family cast out its 'fallen' daughters. The 'hang-ups' we pass on unconsciously, to our children in the form of muddled instincts inherited from our own parents are certainly a sort of original sin. Above all, for those people with a strong sense of God, it is the sin they find it hardest to forgive themselves. The self-disgust that sexual selfishness leaves behind may well account for the harsh asceticism in some of the writings of the early Fathers that seems so strange to us today. The strength of our guilt is a reflection of how strongly we are aware of all that God is calling us to in our sexuality; our two-sided nature is what enables us to love.

Our fears

Man's understanding of the goodness of his own nature has survived all attempts to brand half of it as evil. Despite the urge for simple answers and simple directives, the Church is made up of men and women who know that God's world is not simple, but infinitely complex, full of conflict and tension which may destroy but which may also create. Fear is not an appropriate response to God's gift of himself in his physical world.

The fears need looking at. These are the dark things that need bringing out into the light. Outside the Church, guilt and fear are often unacknowledged and perhaps their destructive powers are even greater where people, feeling sexual freedom must be good, are guilty about feeling guilty in the face of so much man-made chaos. It is not easy to get rid of the many fears, even for those with a knowledge of Christ who carries our load for us.

We fear the loss of self-control and are not prepared to trust the unknown — especially that unknown part of our own nature that lies below the rational surface. Those works of art that celebrate the erotic have a wildness about them (it may be beauty or riproaring vulgarity) that shows that extreme to which sexual passion may run. These are the storms and deeps of human experience, and when Graham Greene tells us that 'lust is a kind of love' we are in deep

water indeed.² We fear the ambivalence of homosexuality, and if we reject its most obvious manifestations it is because we feel the threat to our own equilibrium. We fear the overflow of sexual energy in the young. Their music and their rushing about are often uncomfortably near the edge of violence. We see what happens when such forces run amok in sadism, masochism, rape, murder and perversion. Finally, we are anxious to regularize and make conformable those messy aspects of self-discovery and the search for a mate which are necessarily experimental and far from ideal. Seeing marriage as an ideal expression of God's power in imperfect man, we are often prepared to make the outward formal sign more important than the inward grace of love, and sometimes fail to recognize God's spirit when it manifests itself in patterns that are strange to us.

God in the physical

Yet the world (and we are the world, as well as the Church) has retained a sense of what God has done for us in our physical nature which has survived all our fearful legalizing. In words like 'a love-child', 'a lover', or the expressive euphemism, 'to make love', physical passion has become synonymous with love itself.

Here is a vision of something wider and more vital than institutionalized marriage, which reflects the fact that institutions are only imperfect images of God's meaning. The 'courtly love' tradition of mediaeval times developed as a reaction to materialism and arranged marriages. In every age the sexual impulse has been the strongest of human motives, stronger than social, political and legal patterns, which, after all, are only man-made. It has sometimes brought a saner, purifying influence to bear on structures grown artificial through theories or the accommodation of interests that have little bearing on the needs of love. Our own century has seen the bursting of many bounds, with resulting chaos in sexual patterns. We must not wish it all away, cutting the cloth too narrow for the diverse body of Christ.

Nor must we make ourselves gentle, unrecognizable images of our powerful God. T. S. Eliot sees Christ as the tiger.³ To Gerard Manley Hopkins Christ is at the heart of the storm.⁴ The powerful male instinct in the world finds no expression without an assertive strength. Virginity must be breached if the world is to be peopled, and tensions erupt into anger when frustrated. Too often the other face of God, the gentle image of the Lamb, is embraced through fear. One thinks of those tamed and sweetened representations of

saints which ordinary men see as the religious denial of virility. Their implication that holiness is unattainable by real men does much to present the Church as the refuge of women and children and 'clergy in skirts'. God's creativity strikes awe in many of its aspects. If the fear of God has a meaning, it is the perplexity of human reason when confronted by this vast potential for destruction and chaos which is the raw material of redemption. We should see our sexuality for what it is. Because we are one with animals it expresses our basic 'animalism', which must find expression if we are to be whole.

A healing experience

God is also the Lamb, the clear light of day, the Spirit brooding over the waters. Creation is evolved out of the tensions between such opposites as power and gentleness. However the ingredients of our oddly divided nature came together, it is this very ambivalence, the potential to make or destroy, which we recognize as human. A paradise where the divisions are fused into unity as a promise for the future, such as St Paul describes to the Ephesians (1,3-14), is a richer vision than the unimaginable simplicity of a primeval garden. Soul-making comes about through tensions: a dialectic of body and soul, reason and instinct, male and female. Both the assertive thrust to impress ourselves upon the world, and the willingness to be vulnerable and receptive, are present in every individual, and both are needed for the making of each man and woman. The exchange continues between the self and the other: a drawing apart and a coming together that is never easy if it is to be truly creative.

The sexual act itself is a struggle that becomes suddenly a healing experience: a building up of tensions between two to become a union in one flesh. St Paul tells us not to feel anxious: God wants us to be whole. This act of love gives us that quiet sense of wholeness as nothing else can. Nervous anxieties are stilled. We experience the fusion of body/soul, accepting ourselves as we are. Childhood need and adolescent dream find a home in the present moment. In each partner separately, at that moment, male and female coincide: animal, mind and spirit are felt as one . . . the elements of our evolved nature no longer at war in us.

Part of that same experience is a sense of being an integral element of the physical world: 'They were only grains in the tremendous heave that lifted every grass blade its little height, and every tree, and living thing'.⁵

There is a spiritual dimension more remarkable still in the most

intimate physical union. The paradox of losing oneself while being more fully aware of one's individuality has often been described in abstract terms as the way we shall finally relate to God.⁶ In the sexual act something analogous may be experienced in daily life. Perhaps it is more than a mere analogy — rather an intimation of what we mean when we describe marriage as sacramental. Sexual experience is sacramental in itself and christian marriage sets the seal to something which exists in its own right: the 'solid ground' described by Thomas Corbishley, where 'one's higher activities' are 'rooted and seen to be rooted in the whole cosmic process'.⁷ What deeper roots could there be for God's mysterious design in the world than those every day acts of love?

In common speech, this experience makes us 'feel good'. 'Good', like 'love', is a word that may seem to threaten our own concepts when used by those whose ideas of commitment and relationship in married partnership differ from our own. We should not dismiss such words lightly. God shows himself in all sorts of ways and the act of love is his act. The physical realization (or 'making real') which each performs for the other makes us each aware that we are lovable, and so rids us of our prime source of guilt: the fear that no-one can love us which makes us, like sulky children, want to 'go and eat worms'. If we are happy we do not find it hard to be good. It is the first hint, through a human medium, of the knowledge of just how much we are loved: 'the breadth and length and height and depth' that leaves no room for the taste for sin. This is why we must be gentle with those who want to try love too soon. The fire they are playing with is of God, and they will not listen to us if we try to devalue it.

Mutual redemption

This most personal of all experiences can be shared. When the individual begins to realize the mutuality of the giving and receiving he or she is beginning to know Christ. Sexuality, the irrational, physical life-force which turns the world on its axis, is found to be the bricks and mortar of relationships: physical becoming spiritual in the most commonplace experience of mankind.

As we receive the sense of wholeness, so we give it back again. How can such mutual blessing help but endear us to each other? The act which expresses love creates love: it is God's love-creating action. One sometimes hears a description of this relationship which talks of a third party: the couple and Christ. This sort of well-

meaning analytical phrase can prompt an uneasy feeling of an obligation to be constantly looking over one's shoulder, so to speak. Are we doing it right? Are we conscious at every moment of Christ in our actions? The imposition of such blinkered 'religious' thinking, if it were ever taken seriously by a married couple, could be disastrous to their sex-life. It is as unrealistic as St Augustine's insistence that such action, to be moral, must be always fully consciously rational . . . as if 'rational' were all that we are, or even the most important part. Christ needs no invitation in any saving work we do for each other. He is there already.

Free love is a paradox. Living to ourselves alone is the worst bondage. God's craftiness consists in implanting in us an instinct to gratify ourselves which turns itself inside out. If we insist on being free to please ourselves we remain the slaves of that instinct. It is only by giving everything away that we are fulfilled.

Our journey from cradle to grave is first to find, and then to give, and perhaps finally to be willing to lose, ourselves. For most people the success of that journey requires the help of another person and in a real way what we make of our marriage may be the measure of what we make of our life. For an increasing minority there is a harder, lonelier way. What some may find in a fulfilled marriage others must achieve through the suffering of a broken one.

The first experience of finding ourselves through a sexual relationship bowls us over, as many a love song testifies: 'I didn't know what day it was, till I met you'. By the confirmation of another's touch we are reassured of our bodies: their shape, their weight, their strength, health and normality. We feel real and present in the world. The need fulfilled, the gratitude, the exchange of that kindness, help make the love. We discover that our emotion too is real. We relax and let ourselves be known, learning to 'be ourselves'. As we are reassured and known, we want to reassure and know the other, reaching out for the first time from the bounds of self. Losing ourselves in the getting and giving, we are free momentarily from the sometimes heavy burden of self-awareness we began to carry in childhood. Love is liberating.

A still greater marvel of the whole creative, unifying process is the solid visible fruit it bears: the new person. A child is itself a sacramental sign of the love of the parents, and, in that seven or eight pounds of new flesh and blood that love has made, love is renewed, until our children in their turn learn to 'make love'.

The circle widens to include love and relationships of all kinds, the

rationalizing and organizing of the freely given powerful stuff of creation. The relationships, institutions, contracts and taboos by which we make sexuality liveable are other signs that we are human. We take charge of what God has given us and humanize it — all of us Adams. St Augustine was right when he put reason in charge, but we must never forget its limitations. We devise our laws to help ourselves cope, not to increase our burdens.

Lifelong marriage is the only framework that makes possible the peaceful growing together over the years which is the fulness of natural joy: ' . . . counting the apricots on the wall'.⁸ Milton (although a little hard on the animals) sees that it is by wedded love that

. . . adulterous lust was driven from men
 Among the bestial herds to range . . . by thee
 Founded in Reason, Loyal, Just and Pure,
 Relations dear, and all the Charities
 Of Father, Son and Brother first were known.⁹

Central impulse of civilization

The 'ripples of Christian love'¹⁰ spread into the community: the couple, the children, the extended family . . . friends and community. In the sane vision of shakespearean comedy, as in much of our mainstream literature, the love of man and woman is seen as the central influence of civilization, bringing people into the life of their community, where marriage is the norm. The feeling of sharing the experience common to mankind sustains the lovers. The pattern of mutuality repeats itself as the strength of their relationship in time and space sustains their society. Fairy tales, that tell us about the power of love to overcome thorny barriers and trials of courage, to heal age and ugliness and transform the brute, express the union of prince and princess as a glimpse of heaven on earth: 'happy ever after'. This must be the mainstream of life.

The couple experience directly the life force which is God's creativity: 'Kneeling as cattle by all-generous waters'.¹¹ They have the immense and ordinary privilege of handing on life: giving their children to drink. The immense ordinariness of God's presence in the world is brought home to us in the incarnation, the Word made flesh. Our Lady was an ordinary woman, fulfilling her most natural function. When St Paul confesses his preference for everyone to be celibate like himself he is speaking humanly, rather endearingly, from his own corner. Happiness puts blinkers on us all and it is hard

to see how others can manage to do without the way of life which has been our own path to God. But all people feel in their hearts and veins the pulse of creation, and the generations recognize mankind's primary vocation to go forth and multiply.

Sexuality of the celibate

Married or unmarried, we are all born sexual. Male and female God made us, and we all have our souls to make. No-one is sexually inactive. The celibate, like the married person, has to learn to understand and accept his or her own nature and relate in love to other people. As young children we pass through the same stages of curiosity and growing awareness of our bodies. We win our identity from the same conflicts, physical, mental and spiritual tensions at work in ourselves and between ourselves and others. We relate differently to father and mother, compare ourselves and compete with brother and sister. Told admiringly that we are: 'a real boy', 'a proper little girl', 'quite a young lady', 'growing into a man now', we learn our role in society. The world assigns a family role to those with no specifically sexual place in society, calling the old folk grandad and grandma, the friends of the family aunt or uncle, the religious celibate father, mother, brother or sister. Socially, spiritually, the sexuality of the unmarried defines his 'relations dear'.

With the opposite sex, long before puberty, our behaviour differs. They are a source of delight, irritation, excitement, inspiration. The challenge to understand that other half of God's people not quite like ourselves draws us out of our self-absorption. They are our first experience of the stranger, or even the enemy, whom we must learn to love. 'No married man is ever attractive except to his wife', says Miss Prism.¹² How wrong she was! The pleasure we take in the opposite sex and in the evidence of our own sexuality is one of the lifelong varieties of life and no cause for shame or fear.

Certainly celibates must sacrifice that physical knowledge of God that married people have, with all the pain that that sacrifice involves, the nervous fears and tensions. They should not hope for a quiet life. Emotional involvement with other people is always painful but not a pain they should seek to avoid. They will have their personal loves, and, insofar as they seek to imitate Christ, put their hearts and souls into their love for God's physical world and its men and women. But what they have to embrace is nothing less than the unseen God himself. What that simplicity may do to a man's heart

and soul has been shown to the world by many a saint and experienced by the men and women they loved.

Sexual energy, the life-force in our veins, is the common bond of our humanity. Lovers, one might say, are self-absorbed . . . but not for long. Their energy expends itself on their acts of love for each other at the centre of their lives. The rest follows: the sleepless nights with teething babies, fetching and carrying the children from school, feeding, earning, educating, straining for the sound of a key at midnight, nursing their own parents and minding their children's children: love spilling out willy-nilly. Everyone lives a life of service. The married, if they are not aware of choosing it, find it thrust upon them. The energy of the unmarried is a source of strength at the service of the world. Their life of service is often a conscious choice. Always there are some left out of the loving families. A surrogate mother or father is needed for those without a family, or a friend with cooler emotions than the nearest and dearest. Those whose energy is not tapped at source are those who do the larger work for others: organizing, teaching, healing, making conscious.

Religious celibates choose to dedicate their life-energy to the services of the ordinary world of married men and women. Theirs is: 'the science of divinizing life. . . . It needs the sacraments and prayer and study'.¹³ Their strength is channelled to deepen people's awareness of God among them, to make them understand what it is they do: 'To show the limitless horizons opening out to humble and hidden efforts'.¹⁴ The life Christ chose for himself was to be the servant of the servants of God. To serve and save, to bring to man the God who is already there, is Christ's work.

The circular pattern

Our idea of the Church depends upon the way we see sexuality. This circular concept of the life of the world, with God's creativity at its heart, involves the idea of service as a practical and dynamic necessity. We are all serving what God has told us is his purpose for us: to have life more abundantly: fleshly, personal, spiritual. The needs of our bodies make love; love makes children. Our service of him begins with our service of each other: the child, the mother, the weakest and most vulnerable at the centre of his scheme. The parents provide God's raw material; the priest 'divinizes' that same material. It is a pattern to replace the old hierarchical pyramid with which people, with the sense of proportion and a growing awareness that the sexuality of the world is no aberration, have become

increasingly dissatisfied. Moreover, it is lonely at the top of a pyramid; isolated and rather unreal. The circle, the shape of a family, leaves no-one out.

Practical implications

A new emphasis in the Church which recognizes the essentially sexual nature of creation will affect us all. There are many priests whose self-image makes them ill-at-ease with women, afraid perhaps of what they seem to represent. It is not surprising that they grow to dislike them and feel more at home on the golf course or in the club. The modern tendency to consult and include women in the life of the Church must appear very threatening and account for much of the passive opposition to lay participation. Lay people themselves may feel less ambivalent about their personal lives, and more men even than hitherto want to take an active part in a Church which does not offer them an emasculated ideal of sanctity.

Such an emphasis will affect a theology which often seems hamstrung by out-dated assumptions of the moral evil of the sexual act. Perhaps it will free us from the struggle to develop those aspects of tradition that arose from human ignorance. It should give a more positive and at the same time more practical edge to what we teach our children, if we show how we too value the insights of our time. We will enjoy the vitality of their adolescence a little less fearfully, and gain the courage of our convictions in showing them an adult world of marriage and responsibility which enlarges life instead of narrowing it. Chastity outside marriage makes sense in terms of preserving personal freedom of choice and loving concern for the freedom of others, when the fusing force of the sexual act is properly understood. The gospel of instant self-gratification will no longer be confused with openness and generosity. Our young adults will see how important they are if they can understand how the shape of love and marriage for an era depends upon the sexual insights of each generation.

The celibate and the married may be the more willing to learn from each other the value of their differing experience, instead of offering each other unrecognizable ideals. The same readiness to listen could apply to our relationship with the world we live in. All kinds of love are, in their essence, the same face of God. Too often in the past we have turned our back on human wisdom, or too late and too reluctantly set to work on a 'christianized view'. Modern discoveries may serve the ends of christian marriage just as the world

needs the wisdom of the Church to show that marriage is essentially of Christ. Like the other sacraments it is for sinners; a sign of God with us in the middle of our struggle to give birth to our spiritual selves.

I do not believe that we need any compromise with our traditional ideals in order to make them real for our age. God's creative action in our world is brought to its fulness by the redemptive powers of Christ who helps us to achieve self-possession, self-giving and self-sacrifice, no longer as children tossed to and fro with every wind. Non-believers will find a new significance in a Church which talks about what people know to be important. In their sexual lives God is showing to men and women, who think themselves godless, his creative and personal power at the heart of things. We have only to interpret.

NOTES

- ¹ Shakespeare, William: *Much ado about nothing*, act 3, scene 4.
- ² Greene, Graham: *The power and the glory* (London, 1970), p 76.
- ³ Eliot, T. S.: 'Gerontion' in *Collected poems*.
- ⁴ Hopkins, Gerard Manley: 'The wreck of the Deutschland' in *Poems and prose* (London, 1953).
- ⁵ Lawrence, D. H.: *Sons and lovers* (London, 1979), pp 430-31.
- ⁶ Teilhard de Chardin, P.: *Science and Christ* (London, 1968), p 160, 'Only the forces of love have the property of personalizing by uniting'.
- ⁷ Corbishley, Thomas: *The spirituality of Teilhard de Chardin* (London, 1971), pp 90-91.
- ⁸ Thackeray, W. M.: *Vanity Fair* (London, 1963), p 423.
- ⁹ Milton, John: *Paradise Lost*, book IV.
- ¹⁰ Cf *No marriage is an island* (Laity Commission of England and Wales, 1979).
- ¹¹ Larkin, Philip: 'Wedding wind' in *The less deceived* (London, 1977).
- ¹² Wilde, Oscar: *The importance of being earnest*, act 2.
- ¹³ Teilhard de Chardin, P.: *Making of a mind* (London, 1965), pp 190-91.
- ¹⁴ Teilhard de Chardin, P.: 'The priest' in *Writings in time of war* (London, 1968), p 220.