

A NOTE ON SEXUALITY AND SENSUALITY

FOR RELIGIOUS or, for that matter, all committed christians who have been brought up on the traditional pieties, much of what is said in the foregoing pages by experts like Fr O'Doherty and Dr Gilsean might easily be a cause of deep concern, if not of positive gloom. It would seem that many of those who offer themselves, in response to what they believe to be a call of the holy Spirit, to a celibate and community style of life, are likely to possess more psycho-physical defects than most, and, in addition, are exposing themselves to uncommon psychological hazards. Fr Croft, to be sure, in his remarks on the psychological assessment of vocation, insists that the psychological enquiry is in no way a substitute for the traditional methods. But it must be these very methods, along with the traditional 'spiritual' remedies for what may be termed 'psycho-spiritual' problems, which are now called into question, if we take seriously (as we ware bound to do) the evidence for the psychological havoc religious life seems so capable of wreaking.

The monastic institution in its heyday (at Rievaulx say, under St Aelred) was capable of handling psychological misfits of every shape and size. Similarly, congregations have been founded, and have flourished, with the express purpose of enabling the illiterate, or semi-literate, to find true human fulfilment in the dedication of their lives to God. The history of monastic scholarship throws up distinguished names like Herman the Cripple and Peter the Eater (*Petrus Comestor*) which are indicative of typical psychological traumata; whilst every schoolboy knows that Thomas Aquinas had an extraordinary weight-problem, for which he must have had to compensate! We recognize the Church's wisdom, in this modern literate and democratic age, in strongly recommending the abolition of 'grades' within a religious Institute. But instant external integration, particularly when it involved ignoring the distinction between the academic silk purse and sow's ear, has created as many psychological tensions as it has resolved. (It was not simply the spanish hidalgo speaking when Ignatius Loyola recommended that every jesuit should be content to persevere in the grade into which he had been accepted, and that he who could not read or write should not be ambitious to learn.) We can see now that such integration needed phasing; it needed, above all, re-education and rehabilitation programmes. It still does, and not merely on the academic level. The substantial answer to the stresses occasioned by the generation gap is clearly education to a deeper self-knowledge and fulfilment – on both sides of it.

It is being suggested that the psychiatrist and the psychological counsellor are now sharing a task with (not taking over from) the confessor and the spiritual director: nor is this simply another example of secularization. It is a suggestion which religious should welcome with open arms. The purpose of

religious life is, as has been repeated *ad nauseam*, to co-operate with God in the work of the salvation (that is, complete human fulfilment in terms of Christ incarnate) of the neighbour; and the means to this end is the dynamic 'appreciative' knowledge of God and of oneself – the two cannot be separated. Dynamic psychology is unfolding for us a hitherto largely unsuspected, but essential, dimension of anthropology: that science whose object is to enable a man to understand himself – as he is, as he exists, related to everyone and everything in every corner of space and every moment of historical, created time.¹ For the christian, the sublime fact of revelation has put anthropology in a totally new perspective; every fact that it presents, every tendency to which it points and for which it offers an explanation, is seen in a totally new light. The purpose of light is to see by. The faith does not present us with new human 'facts' and 'tendencies'; it gives us a light by which we see them – and see them transformed; it is a light which radiates from a perfectly developed human being, Christ our Lord. He is perfect man, yet limited to (and by) his own time, culture, circumstances and personal history, and subject to all normal strains and stresses of human existence, except those resulting from personal sinfulness.² It is in this sense that we can say that the christian tradition, at its best, gives us a *spiritual* anthropology, which is capable of illumining all human knowledge, development, relationships, because of its penetration into the mystery of the Incarnation. The present Pope indicates that he is an authentic heir of this tradition when he says:

The great need, then, for communities and individuals alike is to achieve the change from the 'psychical' to the truly 'spiritual' plane. (Cf I Cor 2, 14–15). The 'new man', of whom St Paul speaks in the context of the full stature of Christ in his Church, is the one who participates in this fulness which is the birthright of every Christian.³

A particular case in point, one which illustrates how fruitful can be the relationship between this spiritual anthropology and dynamic psychology, is the concept of sexuality. It has been noticed, particularly in the context of the traditional teaching on marriage and virginity, that

the change in attitude is due . . . to a profounder physiological and psychological understanding of the place in the life and nature of man of what nowadays is called sexuality. This word sexuality has existed for little more than a century, and its acceptance into the realms of human science is principally due to freudianism. We must keep in mind the recent vintage of the word when we venture to

¹ Cf Rahner, K. and Vorgrimler, H.: *A Concise Theological Dictionary* (London, 1965), 'Anthropology', pp 25–28.

² Even while we make this vital exception, we recall that 'the Lord has laid upon him the iniquities of us all', and that 'he was made sin for us'.

Evangelica Testificatio, 38. Cf *Supplement to The Way*, 14 (Autumn 1971), p 19.

reproach earlier writers for their lack of understanding of this dimension which today appears essential to any anthropology.⁴

Yet, in fact, much of what Paul has to say on the distinction between flesh and spirit (*sarx, pneuma*), and all the senses which he attaches, in the hebraic tradition to which Christ himself is heir, to the concept of flesh,⁵ casts an extraordinary, we may even say a transforming, light on the freudian concept of sexuality.

And we can go further than this. It is generally accepted that the western spiritual tradition found a kind of golden age in the english mystics of the fourteenth century. In the use, by Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich, of the word 'sensuality', we find a very striking similarity with the 'sexuality' of the dynamic psychologist.⁶ We must begin, unpromisingly enough, it would seem, with the psychological description and division of the soul which Walter Hilton inherited from St Augustine, and where the context is the medieval image-theology (or theological psychology):

You must understand that the soul has two parts. One is called the sensuality: that is, the ability to feel, bodily, through the outward senses [the ~~rest of the soul~~ by the outward wits] which is common to man and beast . . . The other part is called reason, which itself is divided into two – the higher and the lower.⁷

The twelfth century theologians would point out the intrinsic relationship between the lower part of the reason and the sensuality: the former is the 'mover', the latter that which is moved – a movement which can be downward in the direction of an 'unreasonable beast', or upwards in the direction of the higher part of the reason, which 'is properly the image of God, for by that only the soul knows God and loves him'.

Julian of Norwich, who confesses that she is no theologian nor teacher, 'but a woman unlettered, feeble and frail', is not concerned with theological distinctions, but she does speak a language immediately intelligible to (amongst others) the dynamic psychologist. She is concerned with self-appreciation and self-depreciation (with two aspects of self), but always in the context of man as the creature of the God who reveals himself to his creature. 'Truth sees God and Wisdom beholds God; and of these two comes the third: that is, a holy, marvellous delight in God, which is Love. Where truth and wisdom is, verily there is love, which comes of them both – and

⁴ Crouzel, H.: 'Has Christianity devalued marriage?', in *Supplement to The Way*, 10 (Summer, 1970), p 4.

⁵ Cf Johnston, L.: 'The Flesh and the Spirit', in *The Way*, Vol 11, no 2 (April, 1971), pp 91-99.

⁶ From this point of view, it is ironical to find Dr. Gilsenan writing, 'If Freud and his followers had used the word sensuality instead of sexuality, his theories might have found greater acceptability at the time they were propounded'. Cf *supra*, p 71.

⁷ From *The Scale of Perfection*, Bk II, ch XIII. The source is Augustine's *De Trinitate* XII.

all of God's making. For God is endless sovereign Truth, endless sovereign Wisdom, endless sovereign Love – unmade; and man's soul is a creature in in God, having the same properties, but made'.⁸ By 'soul', Julian means the whole man, the person – both the substantial part and the sensual part. Reason is indeed the higher part, as the sensuality is the lower part – those powers and faculties of man's nature which depend on the body in their operation. 'Our nature is in God, wholly . . . Our nature, which is the higher part, is knit to God in its making; and God is knit to our nature, which is the lower part, in the taking of our flesh. And thus in Christ our two natures are oned; for Christ is comprehended in the Trinity, in whom our higher part is grounded and rooted; and our lower part the second Person has taken – which nature was first prepared for him'.⁹

Julian, like St Paul in his letter to the Romans,¹⁰ is pre-occupied with the constant conflict in man's spirit; but she sees it rather in terms of the way we tend to see and judge ourselves and others, instead of seeing life steadily and whole, as God sees us.

God judges us upon our nature's substance, which is ever kept whole and safe, one in him; and this judgment is of his righteousness. But man judges us upon our changeable sensuality, which appears to be now one thing, now another, according as it is dominated by the different parts and is manifested outwardly. Thus this judgment is variable: sometimes it is good and light, sometimes hard and heavy.¹¹

The fact is that 'this passing life that we lead here, in our sensuality, is not aware of what our true self is, except in faith'.¹² There is a wrath in us – a frowardness and a contrariness to peace and love, which here on earth brings pain, shame and sorrow. 'By the wrath and contrariness that is in us, we are now in tribulation, distress and woe through falling into blindness and helplessness'.¹³ And the solution of wrath is joy, of frowardness, peace and security – when we no longer feel threatened, either by ourselves or by anyone else:

Yet we shall not be blessedly secure in the possession of our endless joy, until we be wholly in peace and in love: that is to say, full pleased with God, and with all his works and with all his judgments; and *loving and at peace with ourself*, and with our fellow christian, and with all that God loves. This is what love is about. This is what God's goodness achieves in us.¹⁴

This goodness of God she perceives as the totality of the divine condescension, in the strictest meaning of that devalued word. He serves us in our sensuality, in the lowest part of our need:

⁸ *The Revelations of Divine Love*, (ed. J. Walsh S.J., London/New York, 1961), ch 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, ch 57.

¹⁰ Rom 7, 23 ff.

¹¹ *Revelations, loc. cit.*, ch 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, ch 46.

¹³ *Ibid.*, ch 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid. Italics mine.*

Man walks upright; his food is taken and hidden in his body as in a very fine purse. And in the time of his necessity, the purse is opened and then it is shut again – all in seemly fashion. That it is God that does this is shewn there where it is said, ‘he comes down to us, to the lowest part of our need’. For he despises nothing of what he has made. He does not disdain to serve us in the simplest offices that belong, in nature, to our body, for the love of the soul that is made to his own likeness. For as the body is clad in clothes, and the flesh in skin, and the bones in flesh, and the heart in the breast; so are we, soul and body, clad and enclosed in the goodness of God.¹⁵

Julian’s understanding of herself and her fellow christian as a ‘body-person’ – to pick up a phrase used earlier in this issue – is drawn from her intuitions of the mystery of the divine Indwelling and of incorporation into Christ:

All the gifts that God may give to the creature, he has given to his Son Jesus for us. Which gifts he, dwelling in us, has enclosed in him, until the time that we shall be full grown.

Here there is a translucent reference to the pauline observation – until we attain to ‘unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ’.¹⁶ But astonishingly, in this context she speaks of interaction and of mutual assistance of body and soul, almost as though the higher and the lower, the substance and the sensuality, are fused as are the divine and the human in Christ:

... until the time that we shall be full grown: our soul with our body and our body with our soul – each of them taking help of the other, until we are brought up to our full stature, according to the workings of kind.¹⁷ And then, in this ground of kind, the holy Ghost, with workings of mercy, graciously breathes into us gifts leading to endless life.¹⁸

The first good that we receive from God is our nature – our kind, which is wholly in him, but which flows out of him and is diversified in mankind; the kind, that is, which has a higher part and a lower, both of which find their union in Christ. The second gift we receive is faith: a power, a higher largesse which ‘comes from our kind substance into our sensual soul, by the holy Ghost’.¹⁹ Faith she describes variously as ‘a right understanding, with true belief and sure trust, of our being: that we are in God and he in us – which

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ch 6.

¹⁶ Eph 4, 13.

¹⁷ ‘Kind’, ‘kindly’ and ‘kindliness’ are normally to be translated by ‘nature’ and ‘natural’; but these equivalents do not impart the richness of Julian’s concept. She will say, for instance, that ‘God is kind in his being. That is to say, the Goodness which is kind is God. He is the ground, he is the substance, he is the very thing called kindness’ *Revelations, loc cit.*, ch 62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, ch 55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, chs 55, 57.

we see not';²⁰ and as 'a light, kindly coming from our endless Day that is our Father God. In which light our Mother Christ and our good Lord the holy Ghost lead us, in this passing life'. It is 'our light in the night'.²¹ But though it flows from our 'substantial ground' that is, in the higher part of the reason – the 'point' where man's spirit is one with the God after whose image he is made, faith, like all our virtues, dwells in, energizes, our sensuality.²²

Walter Hilton, following Augustine, says that the higher part of the reason 'is likened to a man, for it should be master and sovereign . . . for by that only the soul knows God and loves him'; whilst the lower part 'is likened to a woman, for it should be obedient to the higher part . . . in the knowing and ruling of earthly things, in order to use them with discretion according to need'.²³ Julian ignores the anti-feminist traits in the augustinian psychology, and develops the main point, 'that our soul is a made trinity, like the unmade blessed Trinity, known and loved from without-beginning; and in the making, oned to the Maker'.²⁴ For Julian, knowledge of God and self-knowledge go hand in hand; because 'our soul is so deep-grounded in God and so endlessly treasured, that we may not come to the knowledge thereof until we have, first, knowing of God who is the Maker, and to whom it is oned. But notwithstanding, I saw that we have the desire wisely and truly to know our own soul, whereby we are learned to seek it where it is; and that is, in God. And thus, by the gracious leading of the holy Ghost we shall know them both in one'.²⁵ So she is enabled to grow in understanding of herself by contemplating the mysteries of the Trinity, the Incarnation and the Redemption:

Because of the worshipful oneing that was thus made, of God, between the soul and the body, it must needs be that man's kind (nature) should be restored from a double death. Which restoring might never be, until the time that the second Person in the Trinity had taken the lower part of man's kind, to whom that higher part was oned, in the first making.²⁶ And these two parts were in Christ – the higher and the lower, which is but one soul. The higher part was ever in peace with God, in full joy and bliss; the lower part, which is sensuality, suffered for the salvation of mankind.²⁷

For Julian, if there is an image of complementary (or conflicting) masculine and feminine traits in the self, it is because she sees the same in the Trinity:

I beheld the working of all the blessed Trinity. In which beholding I saw and understood three properties: the property of the Father-

²⁰ *Ibid.*, ch 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ch 83.

²² *Ibid.*, ch 59.

²³ *Scale of Perfection*, *loc. cit.*

²⁴ *Revelations*, *loc. cit.*, ch 55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ch 56.

²⁶ 'Faith', Julian says, 'comes from the kind love of our soul, and from the clear light of our reason, and from the steadfast mind which we have of God in our first making. And what time our soul is breathed into our body, in which we are made sensual, at once mercy and grace begin to work'.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, ch 55.

hood, the property of the Motherhood, and the property of the Lordship – in one God . . . I saw and understood that the high might of the Trinity is our Father, and the deep wisdom of the Trinity is our Mother, and the great love of the Trinity is our Lord . . . the second Person, who is our Mother substantially – the same very dear Person is now become our Mother²⁸ sensually . . . in the second Person, in understanding and wisdom, we have our keeping in respect of our sensuality, our restoring and our saving (for he is our Mother, Brother and Saviour).²⁹

In fact, she believes that the very essence of the Incarnation consists in his taking our sensuality to himself; so that his perfection, and all human fulfilment, consists in the dynamic accord between substance and sensuality, which is finally seen as the holiness of Christ, of every christian, and of the Church his mystical body.

For in that same time that God knit himself to our body in the maiden's womb, he took our sensual soul. In taking which, having enclosed us all in himself, he oned it to our substance. In this oneing he was perfect man; for Christ, having knit in himself every man that shall be saved, is perfect man.³⁰

Finally, in the image she draws of the Indwelling, she says that 'the worshipful city that our Lord Jesus sitteth in, it is our sensuality, in which he is enclosed'. All our human longing and suffering flow from our inability to see, feel and achieve the ontological reality of our unitive life in the risen Christ.

We may never come to the full knowing of God, until we know first, clearly, our own soul. For until the time that it is in the fulness of its powers we cannot be all holy; and that is, until our sensuality, by virtue of Christ's passion, be brought up into our substance, with the profit of our tribulation that our Lord shall make us to get, by mercy and grace.³¹

'Spiritual' therapy, then, may certainly be understood in the traditional terminology of being cured by God's mercy and grace by the leading of the holy Spirit, in active and passive purification. But the cure is only possible in so far as we strive to yield to the necessity of knowing and understanding ourselves as we are in our relationship to the true God, to Christ, God made man, who has taken our sensuality: which is why there is a real and developing correspondence between spiritual direction and psychological counselling. In the light of salvation, psycho-therapy is never anything other than the redeeming, healing work of Christ.

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²⁸ Julian goes into fair detail about the qualities of Christ's 'motherhood' – *ibid.*, chs 59–63. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, ch 58. ³⁰ *Ibid.*, ch 57. ³¹ *Ibid.*, ch 56.