

# Sexuality as a Locus of Spirituality

## Introduction

**D**uring the last decades, human sin has been a locus of debate for constructive theologians. Valerie Saiving's pioneering article, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View,"<sup>1</sup> brought women's lack of self as sin to theological consciousness, and many theologians have tried to identify hidden impulses behind the theological construction of Christian sin such as sexism, classism, racism, and heterosexism.<sup>2</sup> One of these impulses is a problematic understanding of human sexuality in Western Christianity, as the following story shows:

She was 37 years old and had been battered weekly by her husband of ten years. Raised as an evangelical Christian to believe that sin and sex were synonymous terms, she accepted her husband's mistreatment as her punishment. When she was 16 years old, she had been date raped by her 20-year-old boyfriend, although she would not describe it as rape. She believed that she had "had sex outside of marriage" and that this was a sin for which God was now punishing her. The notion that she did not have to stay in a battering relationship but had the option to seek help, support, and protection from her abuser was beyond her comprehension.<sup>3</sup>

Among the many issues raised in this story, theological issues are particularly apparent: Christian condemnation of sex outside of marriage, teachings about the roles of husband and wife, and basic attitudes toward sexuality. Transforming abusive relationships in this case requires transforming the theological arguments underlying and even buttressing the relationships. Here lies the social responsibility of theologians.

Christian understanding of sexuality has a long history. Based on a deep spirit-body dualism, Christianity developed "erotophobia"<sup>4</sup> and consequently identified human sexuality with sin. This association of sexuality with sin became an oppressive tool to inflict pain on the sexually abused and on people bearing unnecessary guilt as the above story shows. It was also a rationale for condemning those outside the heterosexual norm, maintaining the status quo of heterosexual hegemony. This paper deals with this issue in an effort to deconstruct the Christian association of sexuality with sin and at the same time to construct a healthy view of human sexuality in relationship to spirituality. Focus will be given to Augustine's treatment of sexuality, which lays the groundwork for subsequent theological developments, and then to Julian of Norwich's as an alternative.

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## **Spirit-Body Dualism in Western Christianity**

From the early days of Christianity up to Augustine's era, Western Christianity developed a strong predilection for the renunciation of sexuality, based on spirit-body dualism. As Kelly Brown Douglas argues, "Pre-Christian Hebrew life showed little tendency toward seeing the body as an impediment to spirituality."<sup>5</sup> Sexuality was considered a gift from God. However, Platonic/Neo-Platonic thought and the Stoic philosophy of Rome, which cultivated a split between the body and the spirit and emphasized the life according to reason, came to influence Christianity. Since then, Christianity has been characterized by spirit-body dualism, which opened the door for the possibility of using sexual practices as "a means for devaluing and demonizing human beings."<sup>6</sup> Peter Brown's extensive research on the body and sexuality in the history of early Christianity clearly demonstrates Douglas' point. The history that Brown presents details the process of degradation of the human body and sexuality in the development of Christian theology.<sup>7</sup>

With this spirit-body dualism, Christianity began to develop the association of sexuality with sin. In the process of incorporating Christianity into the Hellenistic world, early Christians developed the "eroticizing of sin" so that their teachings and beliefs could be integrated into the social and cultural values of the late Hellenistic world.<sup>8</sup> Like Hellenistic philosophers who had equated ideal love with degrading the body, there emerged Christian elites or ascetics who emphasized the inward and sexual aspects of sin. In the transition of early Christianity from a sectarian to an imperial religion in the Roman Empire, the eroticizing of sin served the ideological function of fostering the ascetic Christian identity and the clergy's quest for power.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine was a man of his time. He inherited not only the ascetic impulse of his contemporary Christianity, but also the Hellenistic ideals of his education in rhetoric and philosophy. Augustine's struggle with his commitment to Christianity, as manifested in his Confessions, was nothing but the conversion to continence.<sup>10</sup> It was Augustine who developed a profound way to theologize the association of sexuality with sin.

Augustine's teachings on marriage and sexuality continue to be influential in contemporary society. The technical term that Augustine uses for his treatment of sexuality is *concupiscentia* (concupiscence),<sup>11</sup> which is "the tendency for sexual desire to run contrary to the conscious control of the mind and will."<sup>12</sup> For Augustine, concupiscence is not a sin, but a result of Original Sin. Even though the sin of Adam and Eve was not sexual in its nature, the effects of this sin resulted in a sudden movement of concupiscence which they had not previously known.<sup>13</sup>

Because of the Fall, Adam lost control over the body, and all humanity participates in this sin and its consequence. Human sexuality is a wound or weakness in our soul, which bears witness to our fallen condition. Augustine points to the disobedience of the body and the shame of being naked as proofs of our fallen nature.<sup>14</sup> Just as Adam and Eve disobeyed God, their bodies also disobeyed them as God's punishment. Even though Christians are baptized, concupiscence still remains, and Christians continue to struggle with it and try not to consent to it.

Procreation is of particular importance in Augustine's treatment of sexuality. Concupiscence, which is uncontrolled sexual desire, is excused only for the end of procreation within marriage.<sup>15</sup> In terms of procreation, every sexual activity which rules out the possibility of conception, and sex outside of marriage, are considered to be against nature. Thus, procreation serves as a criterion to restrict sex not only to marriage, but also within marriage. Because the sexual desire experienced even by married couples remains sinful and, therefore, should be reduced to the minimum, a limited justification of sex within marriage provides "no justification for the pursuit of sexual pleasure in its own right."<sup>16</sup>

The impulse to asceticism that had been developed until Augustine gains theological momentum in Augustine's theology. Now sexuality is decisively associated with Original Sin and no justification whatsoever is given for extra/premarital sexual intercourse or sex without procreation. Even within marriage, sexual pleasure continues to be suppressed, as if husbands and wives are not erotic beings.

## “New Mysticism” Emerges

Every theology is a cultural construction in a given period. And not all Christians have agreed upon previously constructed theological discourses, as is the case in the understanding of the body and sexuality. The general ascetic tendency towards the body and sexuality somehow changed in a tradition at the dawn of the Middle Ages. According to Bernard McGinn, the year 1200 marked a major turning point in the history of Western Christian mysticism: “New styles of religious life, especially the mendicants and the beguines, new forms of mystical expression, as well as the sudden emergence of a more powerful role for women, all pointed to an important shift.”<sup>17</sup> This shift resulted in what he calls the “new mysticism” of the Middle Ages. One of the main characteristics of the new mysticism is an “affective spirituality.” Affective spirituality is very emotional, visionary, and even erotic, as opposed to spirituality which is speculative, intellectual, and sometimes antivisionary. Women and men in this era used a lot of bodily imagery, sensual language full of emotions, and nuptial images. Language was feminized in mystical writings, so maternal imagery for designating God was frequently used.<sup>18</sup>

Men and women were different in their use of bodily and feminized language: men used maternal imagery for God “because they needed to supplement their image of authority with that for which the maternal stood: emotion and nurture.”<sup>19</sup> However, women did not have any authority in such a male-dominated society, so their use of this bodily and feminized language was different; women’s concern was physicality.<sup>20</sup> This brings up some questions: what is this physicality that most concerned female mystics? What does this whole emergence of affective spirituality and different use of bodily/feminized language say about the understanding of the body and sexuality in the Middle Ages? What kind of relationship between spirituality and sexuality can be inferred from this rich tradition of affective spirituality in the Middle Ages?

Julian of Norwich serves as an excellent example of affective spirituality. Her mystical writing, *Showings*, is full of emotion and sensual expressions. God is experienced through sensualities. The ascetic tendency towards body and sexuality disappears, and

a strong affirmation of both sensuality and sexuality is emphasized.<sup>21</sup>

Julian’s treatment of Original Sin is distinctly different from Augustine’s. For Julian, Original Sin is not disobedience based on pride but on a limit of our perspective, which prevents us from seeing clearly how much God loves us. She takes a parable of lord and servant as an illustration:

The lord sits in state, in rest and in peace. The servant stands before his lord, respectfully, ready to do his lord’s will. The lord looks on his servant very lovingly and sweetly and mildly. He sends him to a certain place to do his will. Not only does the servant go, but he dashes off and runs at great speed, loving to do his lord’s will. And soon he falls into a dell and is greatly injured; and then he groans and moans and tosses about and writhes, but he cannot rise or help himself in any way. And of all this, the greatest hurt which I saw him in was lack of consolation, for he could not turn his face to look on his loving lord, who was very close to him, in whom is all consolation. . . . I looked carefully to know if I could detect any fault in him, or if the lord would impute to him any kind of blame; and truly none was seen, for the only cause of his falling was his good will and his great desire.<sup>22</sup>

The originality of Julian’s emphasis on Adam’s good will is apparent in this parable. Sin is humanity’s “ignorance” and “blindness” in not seeing the love of God.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Augustine, who considers disobedience triggered by pride as Original Sin and subsequently maintains the disobedience of the human body as the effect of Original Sin, Julian’s understanding of sin strongly suggests a way to disconnect the deep association of Original Sin with the negative understanding of the body and sexuality.

With this new interpretation of Original Sin, Julian moves on to overcome the spirit-body dualism. First, unlike Christian Platonists who associate the body with evil and wickedness, Julian affirms the goodness of the body, because the body, like all things, was created out of God’s goodness.<sup>24</sup> Then, Julian argues a strong affirmation of human sensuality.<sup>25</sup> It is very clear that Julian’s anthropology is, unlike that of the Christian Platonists, a holistic understanding of humanity as “a psychosomatic unity, as body and soul together.”<sup>26</sup> Because of this sensuality,

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this body and spirit togetherness, only the second person of the Trinity is referred to as having our sensuality:

Our substance is the higher part, which we have in our Father, God almighty; and the second person of the Trinity is our Mother in nature in our substantial creation, in whom we are founded and rooted, and he is our Mother of mercy in taking our sensuality. ... And our substance is in our Father, God almighty, and our substance is in our Mother, God all wisdom, and our substance is in our Lord God, the Holy Spirit, all goodness, for our substance is whole in each person of the Trinity, who is one God. And our sensuality is only in the second person, Christ Jesus, in whom is the Father and the Holy Spirit.<sup>27</sup>

God's incarnation in Jesus means God's taking on sensuality like us. Incarnation is a strong affirmation not only of the body and sensuality, but also of the possibility of experiencing the triune God through the body.

We finally arrive at the heart of Julian's understanding of the body and her use of bodily/feminized language. Julian sees women as the symbol of humanity, where humanity is understood as physicality. Therefore, it is because of Jesus' humanity that Julian associates the second person of the Trinity with the maternal image of the mother. As Caroline Walker Bynum argues, "Women saw the humanity-physicality that linked them to Christ as in continuity with, rather than in contrast to, their own ordinary experience of physical and social vulnerability."<sup>28</sup> Through this link of physicality between Jesus and humans, especially women, God is more accessible and familiar to humans.<sup>29</sup> To Julian, the body is not a hindrance to attaining God, but rather a place where humans can have access to God more familiarly.

This view of the body can be equally applied to understanding human sexuality in a new way. Sexuality is not an effect of Original Sin or of darkness in our soul that is identified as sin. We are sexual beings as created in God's image. Just as our body can provide access to God, sexuality is another means for attaining God. Human sexuality is a locus of spirituality. This understanding of human body and sexuality has enormous implications for ethics and spirituality.

## **The Mystery of Sexuality**

What does it mean to understand human sexuality as a locus of spirituality? The definition of sexuality helps us understand this question. Sexuality is not only about physicality and sexual activity. Sexuality is "a sign, a symbol, and a means of our call to communication and communion. ... The mystery of our sexuality is the mystery of our need to reach out to embrace others both physically and spiritually. Sexuality thus expresses God's intention that we find our authentic humanness in relationship. ... Sexuality, we must also say, is intrinsic to our relationship with God. ... [Sexuality] is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion—human and divine."<sup>30</sup> This broad definition of sexuality emphasizes the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual relationship with human beings and the divine. Relationality is an important attribute frequently discussed today in the doctrine of God. Relationships are everything. God is relational in Godself as Trinity. God took the form of relationship in the incarnation of Jesus. God is also experienced in human relationships.<sup>31</sup> Human sexuality represents the most intimate relationship, which serves as a means for union with others, that is, humans and God. Because of these positive implications of sexuality, mystics favored erotic imagery to describe their mystical experience. Mystical experience described in erotic language represents a return of bodily pleasure in our lives.

As long as Christian theologians continue to identify human sexuality with darkness, sin, and woundedness in the soul, the ethics of sexuality will continue to be used to foster the idea of abnormal sexual activities/identities and to condemn them. Once, however, we clear away the association of sexuality with sin and construct a positive meaning for sexuality in relationship to spirituality, we are able to create an ethics of sexuality that deals justly with the sexually abused and marginalized. We ought to bring erotic pleasures back into our faith and lives. Spirituality cannot be distinguishable from sexuality, as the body is not separable from the spirit. As the philosopher Michel Foucault envisions the following, "We have to understand that with our desires, through our

desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, and new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality; it is a possibility for creative life.”<sup>32</sup> Human sexuality can be a place where a new relationship and a creative life can take place.

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