

# *Eros and Christianity*

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## Eros Interpreted As The Individual's Longing For Spiritual and Intellectual Fulfillment

In Western thought *eros* has been a perennially useful concept and has been given diverse interpretations. Thus, from *eros* comes “erotic,” which is used to name feelings, desires, satisfactions, and interests arising from the stirring of genital sexuality. It is, however, unwise to conclude (as some have done) that the erotic encompasses the whole of the meaning of *eros*—i.e., that *eros* is properly understood as the “sexual, passionate, sensual aspect of love.”<sup>1</sup> In this essay I shall take the point of view that *eros* names the individual's seeking and, I suggest, finding and sustaining his relation to whatever objects of love satisfy his longing for fundamental, lasting spiritual as well as intellectual fulfillment. Each of the great world religions provides its own distinctive view or views of *eros* and its own answers to questions pertaining to the relation between *eros* and sexuality. A Christian understanding of *eros* is given us by Augustine in his remark that “Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee.”<sup>2</sup>

## The Traditional and the “Pansexual View” of the Christian Understanding of Eros

Within Christianity, then, there has been what I will call the “traditional” view of *eros* for which Christian spirituality basically

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<sup>1</sup>Wilkie Au, *By Way of the Heart* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 142.

<sup>2</sup>St. Augustine, *Confessions*. Book I, Section 1.

fosters some “asexual” experiences, though—ideally—without denigrating the sexual experiences which are at the heart of Christian marriage. This view is fundamental to Augustine’s *Confessions*, which I will discuss below.

At present, however, this traditional view is challenged by a number of contemporary revisionist views of *eros* which, although they differ among themselves, share the belief that expressions of the individual’s sexual nature are desirable components in all his experiences, interests, concerns, relations with all other persons, and relations with other-than-human forms of life and non-living entities. This view is to be found in the thought of Rosemary Haughton,<sup>3</sup> Matthew Fox,<sup>4</sup> and Richard Chillson;<sup>5</sup> and is also presupposed in *Human Sexuality*, by Anthony Kosnik, *et al.*<sup>6</sup> “Sexuality” here stresses genital sexuality and the “sexual feelings [to which it gives rise but] which need not always be fully expressed.”<sup>7</sup> Hereafter, I shall refer to this as the “pansexual view.” In this essay I wish to criticize and reject the pansexual view and to defend the traditional view.<sup>8</sup>

### Fundamental Unclarities In The Pansexual View

When in conversation I have criticized the claim that sexuality is relevant to virtually all aspects of the Christian’s life, I have often been told that the pansexual view “pertains to gender”—i.e., that the view means that women should express their femininity, rather than repress it, and that *mutatis mutandis* this is also true of men. This interpretation of the pansexual view, however, questions the wisdom of sustaining and expressing all the subjective states that originate in arousal of sexuality. On the other hand, the pansexual view is sometimes said to mean (in ways that are not specified) that genital sexuality is the

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<sup>3</sup>Rosemary Haughton, “Sexuality, Women, and Contemplation.” Lecture given summer, 1990 in Baltimore, Maryland under the auspices of the Baltimore Carmelite Community.

<sup>4</sup>Matthew Fox, *The Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

<sup>5</sup>Richard Chillson, *Prayer Making* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>*Human Sexuality : New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (A Study Commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America) by Anthony Kosnick, William Carroll, Agnes Cunningham, Ronald Modras, and James Schulte (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>Richard Chillson, *Prayer Making* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston, 1977), p. 133.

<sup>8</sup>For a contemporary interpretation of *eros* which is different from that of the pansexual view but also different from the traditional Christian view which I am defending here, see Ginette Paris, *Pagan Meditations* (Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, 1986. Chapter six.



basis of all the needs and satisfactions of *eros*, although in some of these needs and satisfactions the sexual origin is transfigured and so not recognized. This second interpretation of the pansexual view is sometimes a result of an undeveloped, undefended borrowing from Hindu, Buddhist, or Taoist accounts of *eros*. Both of these interpretations of the pansexual view merit examination; but neither is a necessary component of, nor identical with the interpretation of the pansexual view which accompanies them, and which I wish to critique in this essay.

### The Bases of Some Revisionist Views of Christian Sexuality Which Include the Pansexual View

Some thinkers have grounded their revisionist view of Christian spirituality and their acceptance of the pansexual view in the speculative use of conclusions of the human sciences. Thus,

The experience of people today supported by contemporary behavioral and theological sciences understands sexuality much more broadly [than it was formerly understood]. Sex is seen as a force that permeates, influences, and affects every act of a person's being at every moment of existence. It is not operative in one restricted area of life but is rather at the core and center of our total life response.<sup>9</sup>

Another experientially based source of a revisionist view of Christian sexuality which includes the pansexual view may be said to be "quasi-scientific." The use of the word "science" is justified here because the view is offered as deriving from the thinker's personal experiences and interpretations of the experiences of other persons. But this inquiry differs from what we usually call "science" because it is not presented as the result of systematic investigation; it is not offered to an appropriate investigative community for on-going verification; and (unlike the best of science) it is asserted with finality. An example is Rosemary Haughton's appeal to "quasi-sexual" components in everyday experiences which serve as evidence for the pansexual view: e.g., she speaks of a sexual element in our enjoyment of food which combines textures, tastes, and smells and our enjoyment of the feel and color of fabrics; in the longing that "can never be satisfied"; in the art

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<sup>9</sup>*Human Sexuality : New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1977, p. 81.

lover's enjoyment of color and form in pictures; in the care we give to babies and young children; in the "ambiguities of our feelings toward babies"; and "in the satisfaction that physicists and mathematicians take in their work."<sup>10</sup>

Some pansexual views result, at least in part, from selected aspects of Eastern (and at present usually Indian) views of sexuality. Thus, Chillson regrets that Christianity does not have a Hatha yoga.<sup>11</sup> Matthew Fox's thought is a prime example of the deriving of a revisionist view of Christian sexuality along with the pansexual view from a philosophy of nature which, in turn is derived from a partial metaphysics supported by an emphasis on the "cosmic Christ" and creation spirituality.<sup>12</sup>

Rosemary Haughton seeks additional ground for her urging of the pansexual view in her interpretation of Julian of Norwich's *Showings*. Though Haughton asserts that Julian "never used the word *sexuality*," she concludes that Julian is making sexuality an important component of our sensuality, while in this sensuality which "is our substance, . . . we are oned with God."<sup>13</sup> All of these grounds on which the pansexual view is argued are complex, and assessment of any one of them would require interpretation and criticism. It suffices here, however, to point out that each presupposes that "we are our bodies" and sees sexual components as *desiderata* in all our experiences and concerns. Thus, no one of them recognizes the important roles of asexual experiences in Christian spirituality.

### Critique of the Pansexual Interpretation of Sexual Experience

Proponents of the pansexual view seem to presuppose that whether sexual interests are directly or indirectly expressed, or fully or partially expressed, in all sexual intentions and experiences, loving appreciation

<sup>10</sup>Rosemary Haughton, "Sexuality, Women, and Contemplation." This investigative approach to the pansexual view would also yield to a phenomenalist analysis.

<sup>11</sup>Richard Chillson, *Prayer Making* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston), p. 100, 133. Also, Philip St. Romain, *Kundalini Energy and Christian Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

<sup>12</sup>Matthew Fox, *The Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988).

<sup>13</sup>Rosemary Haughton, "Sexuality, Women, and Contemplation," Lecture 1990, Baltimore, Maryland. In the source from which I have taken Haughton's view it is not clear whether or not she is using two arguments for the pansexual view—i.e., whether she both argues from experience and appeals to the authority of Julian of Norwich. Another interpretation would be that she is using one of these (the experiences or the writing of Julian) as evidence for the other.



of other persons arises easily and that no attention needs to be given to the frequency and ease with which unsatisfactory, self-seeking, and evendestructive sexuality also arises. Thus, Haughton asserts, "we have to find a way . . . to feel and to believe that sexuality and contemplation are words expressing aspects of the same spiritual energy, which enables men and women to be healed and become whole and to be themselves healers. . . ." <sup>14</sup>

Sexuality, however, can be completely self-serving. So far as subjective states are concerned, sexual intentions and experiences which in some sense involve another person can nonetheless be a variety of autosexuality and thus devoid of any reaching out to another. But even though the reaching out to another person is present, it need not include an intention of fostering the well-being of the other. Also the cultivating of a sexual component in virtually all experiences may be a way of coping with emotional problems; a way of relating to others in an effort to gain their acceptance; a spirit of aggression or hostility toward others; or, a will toward dominance over others. Again, the welcoming of sexuality in one's relations with others can endanger the sincerity and wholesomeness of those relations; can be an inconsiderate interference with the spiritual development of the person whose views on sexuality are not yet formed or who does not have sufficient strength of character to resist that interference; can be a way of making demands on others which they would rather not have in their lives; or can be a way of taking advantage of the emotional needs of another. But in this context what matters most is that the pansexual view does not encompass the asexual experience in one's relation to others. <sup>15</sup>

### Eros and Embodiment

Are there aspects of the self that contribute to virtually all of the individual's experiences? Yes, there is at least one aspect of the self which is present, sometimes centrally and sometimes peripherally, in all our conscious moments. This is our sense of embodiment, the

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<sup>14</sup>Rosemary Haughton, *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Paris, *Pagan Meditations* (Dallas, Texas: Spring Publications, 1986). Paris accepts the importance of what I have called the asexual experience within spirituality, but she argues on secular or naturalistic grounds, rejecting the traditional Christian view of the asexual.

“withness of the body.” Does sexuality either necessarily or ideally have a role in all experiences of embodiment? There may be some persons for whom every experience has a sexual component. As we have seen, there are some who deem the presence of sexuality in all situations to be an ideal. What of a Christian view of the roles of sexuality in the experience of embodiment? It is true that in a context of Christian thought it is sometimes asserted that the human being “is his body.”<sup>16</sup> But it is doubtful whether identification of the self with the physical body does justice to the Christian view of the spiritual aspects of man. Furthermore, the assertion “I am my body” need not be interpreted as having as a corollary the assertion that all my experiences have a sexual component. The embodied human being may have beneficent experiences that are not sexual. Also, we have noted that sexuality is not always beneficent, a *desideratum*, or welcome. And as I will emphasize in what immediately follows, many Christians have spiritual experiences which they prize very highly and which have no sexual component.

### Eros and The Asexual Experience

For the traditional Christian view, the characteristics of beneficent sexuality are not co-extensive with all spiritually significant human experiences. Thus, in the experience of beneficent sexuality there is a self-consciousness which includes some degree of awareness of one’s own body. At the heart of this experience is the shared pleasure of two persons who have a mutual love which legitimately gives rise to shared psychological and spiritual as well as to physical attraction. Certainly for Christians, and I suggest for numerous non-Christians, some of the most significant human experiences lack these characteristics. There are experiences in which we are not involved self-consciously with our own subjective states and in which our awareness of our own bodies is decidedly peripheral and may be virtually non-existent. And apart from sexuality, most of us have had experiences of a wholesome self-forgetfulness in which we are free from demands of our subjective states of frustration, confusion, anger or fear for our personal

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<sup>16</sup>*Human Sexuality: New Directions in Catholic Thought* (Mahaw, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1977), p. 83.



affairs. In these experiences we get outside ourselves in compassion for, admiration of, simple enjoyment in, profound involvement with, interest in, or sense of mystery and awe before what is not ourselves, but to which we respond with respect, love, or a desire to care for or to protect.

Examples of these spiritually significant experiences which for some of us have no sexual component are not hard to find. There is the intellectuality and spirituality by virtue of which some persons lose themselves in the very great fulfillment they find in mathematical, scientific, or philosophical inquiry.<sup>17</sup> There is the getting free of our self-consciousness in an outgoing delight of beauty in nature; the beauty which divine grace gives to the human spirit; the loving, caring response to human infants; and, the pleasure in the playful companionship of animals. There is the aesthetic delight in the sound of well-made bells, the fragrance and structure of blossoms, or the contemplation of the sky on a cloudless night when city lights do not interfere with our seeing the stars. There is the experience of wonder before the complexity of nature and of the mystery which surrounds us everywhere in the physical world, in other persons, and in our own spiritual and intellectual potentialities which the traditional Christian believes can be realized only through grace. There is the Christian hope for stability and peace in his life and in the lives of others, a hope which he cultivates in the midst of fear and unrest. There is compassion for the suffering of a sentient being, whether human or non-human, and the voluntary self-giving required to alleviate that suffering. And there is the Christian's gratitude to Jesus for his redemptive suffering and death.

In current studies of the roles of sexuality in the Christian life, how shall we determine the most adequate interpretation of the nature and value of experiences which are spiritual and asexual? I have suggested that interpretations of human sexuality which include the pansexual view are shaped by a confused set of presuppositions and investigative procedures. This view appeals to experiences of those contemporary Christians, for whom sexuality is that whereby "we are present and

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<sup>17</sup>The pleasure and fulfillment to be found in these activities are well known to me, and I cannot agree with Haughton that these have a sexual component or that such a component would be a desideratum.

open to that which is not ourselves. . . .”<sup>18</sup> And it is not clear whether the pansexual view is an inductive or speculative conclusion derived from experience or a deduction from the assertion “we are our fleshy bodies” together with the presupposition that to be “fleshy” is to possess a pervasive sexuality.

In any event, inquiry into the significance of spiritual asexual experiences and concerns requires the inclusion of personal experiences of Christians. The pansexual view draws on these personal experiences but stresses only those which seem to admit sexuality. The traditionalists, however, have their supporting experiences too. On these matters, then, among present-day Christians there is diversity; and some of us, without being alienated from our sexuality, are in agreement with Augustine that an ever-present sexuality resulting from our necessary embodiment would make impossible the attainment of some of our most prized experiences and the cultivation of some of our most valued concerns.

#### Asexual Experiences and the Christian's Relation to The Divine

In the foregoing I have emphasized the asexual nature of the Christian's experiences with other persons, with truth-seeking, and with visible and tangible aspects of creation; and I suggested that the Christian's meditation on his relation to Jesus is ideally an asexual experience. It is sometimes claimed, however, that sexual elements are *desiderata* in Christian meditation and mysticism.<sup>19</sup> In what immediately follows I will argue that both of these aspects of Christian spirituality are ideally asexual experiences.

At the present time the nature of meditation and mysticism and the relation between them are controversial subjects.<sup>20</sup> In this context

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<sup>18</sup>*Human Sexuality: New Directions in Catholic Thought* (Mahaw, New Jersey: Paulist Press), p. 83.

<sup>19</sup>Richard Chillson, *Prayer Making* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Winston, 1977), p. 132.

<sup>20</sup>Fox gives a list of “experiential definitions of mysticism” which include “experience itself,” “affirmation of the world as a whole,” [the being] “self critical”, etc. This definition, however, leaves out the experience of the encounter with the transcendent God who is also immeasurably close and who must be conceived in personal terms. See Matthew Fox, *The Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), Part II: 13.



by Christian meditation I mean a spiritual/intellectual effort in which a Christian initiates, sustains, and draws to a close his reflections on issues which are of some moment within his life of faith and thus may be either directly or indirectly related to the divine. By mystical encounter with the divine I mean experiences in which the individual has been enabled to encounter one of the three divine Persons, and notably God, the Father. Of course, Christian meditation and mystical encounter with God are interrelated. Thus, the Christian believes that in at least some of his meditations he is guided, supported, and illumined by the Holy Spirit. He might be given new insights or courage, even though he is not conscious of the presence of the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, as I use the terms here, Christian mysticism is fundamentally a passive experience, while Christian meditation is consciously carried on by the Christian himself.

Sexual elements are, I suggest, not compatible with Christian meditation and mystical experiences. In Christian meditation we are concerned with, and in mystical experience we receive, what is spiritual: "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." Moreover, in mystical experience and in some meditation we are given what other humans cannot give us and what we cannot generate for ourselves: namely, spiritual development, increase in our faith, and deepened conviction that we are cared for, regardless of the roles the Cross may have in our lives. Moreover, the meditation which the Christian chooses and whatever of mystical experience is given him always have two foci. Their chief focus is awareness of God's love for the mystic and for all men. And their second focus is the divine gift of encouragement for the Christian to deepen his love for his neighbors and assurance that he will have further divine assistance in his endeavors to give that love. But only in the Christian's relation to his human spouse is his sexual nature invited.

Sometimes religious interpretations of the meaning of art objects are used as support for a revisionist view of Christian sexuality. The use of art objects for this purpose, however, is easily criticized. First, any art object is merely one artist's expression of his way of seeing his subject, while the use of an art object as evidence supporting any one view of Christian spirituality is an appeal to one viewer's or reader's interpretation of the artist's view, which is more revelatory of the spiritual and intellectual nature of the interpreter than of the nature of the artist's creation. I can illustrate this point with references to the "Song of Songs," John Donne's poem addressed to the "three-personed

God,” in which the poet declares that he “cannot be free, Nor ever chaste, except you [i.e., God] ravish me”; and Bernini’s statue of St. Teresa in ecstasy.

That the language of the “Song of Songs” is to be taken literally is one hypothetical interpretation. But it is important to consider the possibility that the poem uses figures of speech to express the soul’s relation to God. Today, of course, we urge the poet to create his own idiosyncratic “images,” quite apart from any philosophy of sources and roles of figures of speech. Given the ancient wide-spread interest in correspondences, archetypes, and analogies of metaphysical truth, however, we do well to reflect on the alternative hypothesis that this poem is explained by the view that human sexual nature repeats patterns which are also found in nonsexual realities, and specifically in the soul’s relation to God and its longing for God. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same is true of John Donne’s poetic line.

Again, mystical experiences are pre-eminently private experiences. The argument that, since mysticism involves the body, it necessarily has a sexual component (being a “holistic experience”) requires extensive examination. Such an argument perhaps fails to suitably illumine the *de facto* subjective content of Christian mystical union with God. And *a propos* of Bernini’s statue of St. Teresa, investigation of Christian sexuality and mysticism requires emphasis on reports of the subjective content of the Christian’s experience with both sexuality and mysticism rather than on an interpretation of merely an artistic depiction of behavioral aspects of the Christian mystic’s experience of God.

Finally, there are reports of Christians whose sexuality is a component in their meditation and mystical experience. I suggest that the presence of sexual elements in these circumstances derives either from psychological and spiritual immaturity or from non-Christian (probably Eastern) elements which are improperly assimilated into Christian spirituality.

### Augustine’s View of Sexuality

A contemporary study of ideal as well as actual roles of sexuality in the Christian life of faith will need to encompass both traditional and contemporary revisionist views on this topic. In part this is true because the inquiry must be based on well-grounded conclusions concerning the traditional view rather than on superficial



opinion or unexamined bias. But it is also true because, although in our day some Christians have denigrated Augustine's views on sexuality, others find Augustine a satisfactory spiritual guide in this matter. At the present time Augustine's view of sexuality requires more development and defense than he gave it; Augustine could not enjoy our extensive, diverse, and "enlightened" modern explanations of sexuality. As we know, many psychological, sociological, theological, and medical conclusions concerning sexuality are incompatible with his view. Of course, Augustine could not be expected to have answered challenges to his views on sexuality which had not yet become topics for discussion within Christendom. In light of this, Christians should suspect the perspective from which, and the spirit in which, current work on Augustine is carried on. Thus, Matthew Fox writes, "Augustine basically regrets the fact that we are sexual, sensual creatures."<sup>21</sup> But Friederich von Hügel had a different perspective. He wrote that Augustine did not "censure the sex instinct as such . . . he declared a moderate, readily controllable sex instinct to be right. . . ."<sup>22</sup>

Augustine emphasizes asexual spiritual experiences which are opportunities for self-giving, for self-forgetful praise of God, and for maintaining faith during times of spiritual dryness, anxiety, or intense psychological and spiritual suffering. I suggest that Augustine has not recommended that Christians become alienated from their sexuality, but rather has called attention to the fact that without Christian discipline, our sexual nature can become tyrannous over us, thus preventing our discovery of the beneficent spiritual experiences which are high points in our lives of faith and in which sexuality is neither a necessity nor a *desideratum*.

### Conclusion

The contemporary pansexual view of Christian sexuality is offered as factual. These reports of real or imagined pervasive sexual interests and experiences probably have a multiplicity of sources. Some of the emphases may be semantic because of a tendency today to define

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>22</sup>*Spiritual Counsel and Letters of Baron Friederich von Hügel*, ed. by D. V. Steere (New York: Harper and Row, 1964) p. 116.

all beneficent experiences in terms of mysticism; all mysticism in terms of creativity; and all creativity in terms of sexuality.<sup>23</sup> This, of course, is a revisionist rather than traditional understanding of Christian sexuality as well as of Christian mysticism, which may in some of its contemporary occurrences have Taoist, Buddhist, or Hindu components.<sup>24</sup> Also the phenomenon of some Christians finding that sexuality is pervasive in their lives may be the product of sexual, psychological, and spiritual immaturity which is exacerbated by the contemporary widespread urge to cultivate a sexual component in almost all of our interests.

I have suggested, however, that within the Christian life there are numerous opportunities to seek and to love asexual spiritual experiences and that there are contemporary Christians who know and cherish the self-forgetfulness, courage, and strength which derive from the spiritual experience that is asexual. This experience is shaped by the divine urging (to paraphrase Augustine) to satisfy *eros* through love for and service to the creatures of God, for the sake of God, with God, and in God.

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<sup>23</sup>Matthew Fox, *The Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), Part II: 13.

<sup>24</sup>The combining of Christian and non-Christian elements in a particular spiritual path, which might prove rewarding, is also beset with pitfalls. This important topic lies outside the scope of this essay.