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Whither Sexual Ethics?

Warren T. Reich

I would like to call this a theological essay on certain basic dimensions of traditional and contemporary Christian sexual ethics, singling out some dimensions which have frequently been overlooked and which may prove helpful to those who are searching for an ethic that will be credible for the "sexual revolution" of today.

What are these critical, fundamental dimensions of Christian sexual ethics?



Modern ethical studies have revealed that many of our Christian moral presuppositions and prescriptive norms for sexual ethics have been greatly conditioned by culture and cultural attitudes; that they have not all been with us from the moment of creation, but have developed in time under the influence of changing conditions and pressures; that our religious traditions and myths have influenced the holding of our sexual ethic far more than a natural law ethic (at times verging on

Reverend Reich is an associate professor of Moral Theology at the Catholic University of America where he is also chairman of the Division of Moral Studies. He has published works on conscience, natural law, sexual ethics and medical ethics in theological journals and books in this country and in Germany. He is Secretary of the Council on the Study of Religion and an associate editor of the theological review Concilium.

the rationalistic) might lead us to believe; that sexuality at all of its levels is good and that an almost unbroken tradition of pessimism in our tradition is unwarranted; that our sexual ethic is not a static set of rules given from outside human experience, but arises from our understanding of the inner meaning of sexuality, and so is subject to the changing knowledge and the accruing biases of a given era; and finally that a Christian methodology for a normative ethic which emerges in the New Testament calls for a continuing reappraisal of all ethics. All of this implies at least that today's search for a relevant sexual ethic is not itself unthinkable.

SEXUAL ETHICS IN SCRIPTURE

Scriptural studies show that the will of God for man is not imposed on man "from the beginning" in a refined and normative way, but is expressed in God's dealings with his people in a way that presupposes their own cultural development and experience. It is commonplace in biblical studies nowadays to acknowledge that the people of Old and New Testament times shaped and reshaped their sexual ethics in the course of a long history, in which culture, economics, general civilizing factors, struggles against pagan practices, and the religious thought forms of biblical faith all played a role.¹

Even the creation accounts, which present an "ideal type" or prototype couple drawn of loving partnership and blessed with fruitfulness, come from a relatively late period and presuppose a long cultural development and experience. They do not intend to offer an historical presentation of an

initial order of creation, and hence one should not read into them a definitive ethical teaching.

The Bible does not claim to teach us about the essence or meaning of human sexuality as such—that is the task of the human study of a secular reality (a fuller understanding of which always seems to be eluding the grasp of man in every era). None of the biblical writings represents a conscious attempt to produce a systematic presentation of man-woman relations, of sexuality, marriage, family, etc., from the scientific, the philosophical or the theological point of view. Because the Scripture is primarily religious in its purpose, it should not be used as a reference work for psychology or sexology or sociology or even "rational ethics."

Yet the sexual ethical understanding of man in Scripture is significant, for it says something important about the presuppositions, or the self-understanding, of man and his situation considered in relation to God. The Old Testament speaks of sexuality as that which attracts to a union which is more profound and more intimate than the relation to one's parents (cf. Gen. 2 and 3). It is "not good for man to be alone": he is drawn to a personal union with woman who is a person like man — a union "in one flesh" involving not just body but the totality of person and life. The distinction of the sexes is not from some evil origins but from God the Creator. Sexuality is not something on the "animal level" of man, but belongs to man as the image of God. A positive value is placed on the propagation of the race; and yet human sexual love has a value independent of fertility.

Sexuality shows incompleteness, transitoriness, a tragic element, because the human condition itself is under the influence of sin.

The Old Testament had very "progressive" teachings about human sexuality when compared to the general cultural setting at the time of the composition of its various parts. Yet many of these presuppositions on the values of human sexuality were not to be commonly accepted for many centuries afterward. They had to find their way only gradually into the ethos of the people. For instance, the clearly dominant teaching of the Old Testament was that marriage is good, that procreation is good, that love is good: these are the blessings of God. But which is the greater value: the institution, fertility, or experienced love? There is no doubt that fertility dominated over love in the historic world of the Old Testament (principally because of male domination); but the teaching of the Old Testament did not give definite guidelines as to whether and to what degree man should exercise dominion over his sexuality and its effects so as to maximize the personal dimensions of sexuality. Thousands of years later that question is still being discussed.

The Bible is not an ethical rule book; it establishes God's claims on man, and then shows how man lives and should live in response to God and in changing historic relations. The task for theology remains the same today: first, to understand what are the basic moral demands for the believer; and only secondly to clarify to what degree concrete, universally valid precepts can be given so as to support the basic moral task.

Biblical religious ethics basically calls for the conformity of human life and conduct with the will of God, but the divine will is not understood as unchangeable in regard to the content of all the demands that are made. It is God's faithfulness to his promises that is unchangeable. The basic religious-ethical dimension of man who exists from and for God, of man the sinner being called to respond to God in a life of faith is also a constant element. In fact, this dimension is an important principle of religious ethics. For without this revelational dimension even an empirical knowledge of man's concrete historical nature would be hidden from him. Man would not know the true dimensions of the faithful sexual love of which he is capable except for knowing of Yahweh's faithful love for an adulterous People. This is but one instance of the influence of the covenant concept in developing the religious ethics of the Old Testament.

The Chosen People regarded the will of God for a holy Israel as the will of the covenant and considered itself responsible for its fulfillment. Yet the concrete moral norms were largely conditioned by temporal and cultural history, for it was the very time-conditioned and culture-conditioned dimensions of religious man which called for basic moral precepts. At one time there was strong legislation against homosexuality and bestiality and temple prostitution, and at other times against marital intercourse during menstruation. In many instances it was the already existing tribal law that was taken over into the covenantal order.

The content and forcefulness of moral demands as regards specific sexual behavior developed most com-

monly out of changing historical conditions. For example, the changing standard from polygamy to monogamy was accomplished only gradually under the influence of socio-economic factors (especially those affecting the place of women in society); Israel's struggle against its neighboring nations and their sexual cults; and the gradually unfolding covenantal teaching of Yahweh's conjugal relation to his People. Yet, because the man enjoyed greater freedom in issuing a note of dismissal to the wife, the notion of full and equal partnership was only to be completed in the framework of the New Covenant.

THE RADICAL DEMANDS OF LOVE

The New Testament likewise presents not a juridic ethic, but a religious message of salvation which also finds its expression — especially in the apostolic preaching — in concrete, historically conditioned ethical demands. This message, which is the core of the ethics of Jesus, is the preaching that the kingdom of God is at hand and that the merciful God offers love and salvation in his son Jesus Christ.

This message places everyone before a decision. The hearer of this message is not challenged simply to assent and conform to the words and demands of Jesus, but to give himself to the person of Jesus in faith. Hence every attempt to isolate the moral sayings of Jesus from their context of a personal following of Jesus and to insert them in a philosophical-ethical system of thought necessarily does violence to them. Christ was not a perfecter of moral laws (such as in his discourse "on the Mount"), but invited all men to the one law of love which was his first and greatest command. This was not seen as a com-

mand among other commands, for love — whose true meaning was found only in the example of the Lord — is a formative power which must inspire all human behavior and especially interpersonal relationships.

Christ subjected to the radical demand of love the historically conditioned cultural and religious norms which had been handed down to his contemporaries. Likewise, the preaching of the early Church (as presented in the New Testament) made efforts to show which concrete demands are made upon the Christians in their historical milieu by a life of faith and love. Many moral directives are included in the message of the crucified, risen and ascended Lord. For instance, "fornication, gross indecency, sexual irresponsibility . . . and similar things" (Gal. 5:19, Jerusalem Bible) are excluded — even with considerable rigor — as behavior opposed to the Spirit. Such directives and admonitions present models of behavior which serve as an orientation and an application of the command of love to life within the framework of the culturally and historically developed institutions of the world of those times.

The New Testament teaches us very little about social institutions such as marriage. It tends to accept social institutions as they are (e.g. slavery is not condemned), and to transform them from within by instructing the faithful how they should live in those institutions out of faith in the risen Lord. Marriage, together with other ways of life and institutions in the Jewish tradition, was subjected to the critical demands of love under God's rule. The result was the fulfillment of the true meaning and exclusiveness of monogamy. The prohibition of divorce with remarriage (Mt. 19) should not be understood as Christ's amendment of a

Mosaic law, but as a consequence of that love which Christ brought into the world and which he demanded of his disciples — a love which should be prepared to renounce infidelity and disillusionment, for marriage, in Christ's kingdom, becomes a sign of salvation in which man is totally and permanently called and enabled to be with and for the other in love (Eph. 5). Christ did not re-arrange human institutions, and Paul certainly did not advocate a revolution against the male dominated hierarchical structure of marriage; but these institutions were gradually reformed from within through Christ's redeeming love.

Today there are profound and disturbing questions concerning sexual behavior (such as seemingly widespread extramarital sex as a quasi way of life in a liberated generation) and the very institutions of society (communal marriages). It would seem neither correct nor helpful to approach these questions as though the moral answers were already contained in a Christian social-legal order which is valid for all times. It pertains more to the social sciences and perhaps to philosophical anthropology to study social changes, and to make judgments on the suitability of new institutions in society.

Certainly, in reference to the sayings of the New Testament, it is important to distinguish between that element of the moral demand which is valid in a fundamental and perduring way and that which simply corresponds to a cultural-historical concept. St. Paul advocated the subservience of wife to husband, but that was a culturally and historically conditioned "fact of life" which did not withstand the test of the radical demands of love (though it is still with us today!).

What is perduring is the demand that the sexual relationship of spouses should perfect itself in love and that the consequence of true love is an unconditioned bond of fidelity (even though pastoral exceptions seem to have been made on occasion in Scripture and certainly exist in the tradition of the Eastern Church). The point we want to make is that some sexual prescriptions have a universal and transtemporal validity — not simply because they are found in Scripture (that would make the Bible into a moral manual), but because much of the moral exhortation in the apostolic preaching — that which was considered "typically good" behavior for the first Christians — is also "typically Christian" in our age according to the radical demands of love, and thus has an abiding importance.

Christian ethics cannot be absolved from the discomfort of the moral task of every age: to penetrate beyond the historical circumstances and practical instructions of the New Testament to perceive what is truly the model for Christian behavior in the present situation; and to discern what the radical demands of love require as a concrete action here and now.

The need to subject the various modes of human existence to the radical demands of love should not imply, however, that the Christian community of any era simply waits and sees what sexual-social patterns develop and then exercises this critical function. The Christian of every era (and on this point our age does not seem to be much different from other ages) lives his Christian existence within a struggle of various societal value systems. He must personally live in a Christian way within these struggles

and make his own contribution to the reform of such systems. To enable the common Christian to accomplish these difficult tasks, there is need for the aid of formulated directives as the conceptual and moral "bearer of values", so to speak. This function of the sexual norm in a Christian context should not be overlooked.

THE SEARCH FOR A SEXUAL NORM

As we have seen, the Bible did not propose a systematic, normative sexual ethic. It never treated several important questions such as the "ends of marriage", sexual pleasure, and contraception. Yet it initiated a religious ethos of sexuality productive of very high ethical standards. The Christian community of the first centuries had the task of constructing a Christian doctrine of marriage and sexual ethics. The New Testament texts had emphasized different and sometimes contrasting values: the great commandments of love, virginity as a preference, sex as a "remedy for concupiscence," the intimation of the sacramentality of the loving union of spouses, salvation through child-bearing "in faith and charity," the use of sex in marriage "with thanksgiving," the recommendation of abstinence in marriage, condemnation of "fornication," homosexuality, etc.

It was necessary for the early Christian community to select, emphasize, and apply biblical texts — but this construction of a sexual ethic was not performed in a vacuum. "The state of medical knowledge was one factor in the development of theory on marital intercourse. The predominant institutional modifications of monogamous marriage in Roman society, namely, slave concubinage and easy divorce, affected the values which Christians

would stress in marriage. Contemporary Jewish thought and contemporary Stoic thought formed other patterns limiting the impact of the Gospels. Gnostic speculation created a current to which Christians reacted."²

This process of selection, reaction and emphasis in developing a sexual ethic has been true of every age, and it is true of our own. Modern Catholic teaching on the morality of non-marital sexuality, masturbation, homosexuality, and the like, is the result of many deeply experienced religious and moral values, many historically conditioned philosophical convictions, many biological and sociological presuppositions of previous ages, and a multiplicity of prejudices. It must honestly be acknowledged that many of the moral norms commonly held within the historical unfolding of the Catholic Church are norms which did not simply drop down out of heaven as undiluted divine law: they were strongly influenced by attitudes, and attitudes are changeable. Instances of this can be seen in the two dominant influences on our sexual ethic: the thought of St. Augustine and of St. Thomas Aquinas.

The dominant sexual morality in the Catholic tradition has presupposed that everything sexual — the sexual organs, sexual activity and emotions, as well as the effects of sexual activity — find their full and correct meaning only in marriage, and that the "primary" purpose of marriage is the procreation and education of children. This teaching was coupled with a strong pessimism about sexuality which can be traced (in part, at least) to the influence of St. Augustine, who taught that man's sexual inclinations were greatly crippled: a concupiscence showing the impairment of original sin leads to man's lack of control over the

ecstatic and intensive venereal pleasure which overpowers the spirit of man. He advocated a Stoic self-mastery, sublimated through Christian love; but sexuality may be "used," he taught, only when it has a function of service: for procreation, or for the "rendering of the sexual debt" in marriage. Only in these cases may sexual pleasure be tolerated as unavoidable.

In many ways Augustine was a brilliant architect of sexual ethics for his times, but not for our times, at least not without some major qualifications. For instance, it may correctly be said that theologically Augustine was a personalist, but not in the sense of advocating a deepening of conjugal love expressed in the psycho-physical union of husband and wife. The moral importance of sexual love only became a conviction in the Christian community much later — in fact, not until the 20th century.

Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth century theologian, was the other dominant influence in molding Catholic moral teachings in sexual matters. He was intent on a "reasonable ordering" of man's sexual appetite, and favored a natural law tradition according to which all animals (man included) have a common nature. Thus Thomas saw the sexual appetite of all animals determined morally by the preservation of the species — a view that was greatly influenced by medieval cosmology. He acknowledged the importance of truly "human" elements of sexuality, such as the education of the children; but as a result of his teaching the "objective structure of the sexual act" was consistently seen "primarily" under the aspect of procreation. According to this teaching, love, which is only directed to the

fulfillment of the individual, is not important in the nature of things: procreation for the good of the species.

For his times, Aquinas proposed a "modern" sexual ethic. But subsequent centuries absolutized his notion of the primacy of procreation and the "correctness" of the (marital) sexual morality — largely influenced by a faulty biology of sexuality. This particular philosophical version of the "primacy of procreation" in sexual morality, for its basic principle is that any sexual action that was "per se procreative" between a potential married couple was intrinsically evil. This basically gave the "moral solution" to all such questions as masturbation, pre-marital sex, homosexuality, contraception, etc. Within this conceptual framework, only "objective" factors, such as diminution of freedom due to passion, habit, etc., remained to be taken into account.

This method of ethical thought came to emphasize the biological element so heavily as the basis for moral propriety that a number of Catholic theologians taught that masturbation is "against nature," but incest is not; incest is per se less grave, for it is "according to nature" though "against reason." This teaching is an obvious result of that tradition which saw chastity and the sexual order preserved by the integrity of the act. While striving to protect the sources of life, this tradition produced an unfortunate dualism between (bodily) nature and reason.

A revolution of thought occurred in our century, however, once Catholic

theology began listening to psychology, sociology, and to married people themselves. The personal, intimate, loving union of two people began to be seen as having a meaning in itself. Catholic theology has not begun to deny the importance of procreation, the sacredness of the sources of life, and the whole life-giving process in man. But it has begun to take more seriously the two-in-one-flesh (total, personal, loving union) teaching of Genesis, the sublime teaching of St. Paul on sexual love as the sign of Christ's love for his people (Eph. 5), and Christ's own emphasis on the primacy of love. Even the Church's *magisterium* turned a major corner in the 1950's (Pius XII) and 1960's (Vatican Council II) when love was proposed as an important *moral criterion*: the almost exclusive "primacy" of procreation was unseated without being belittled.

THE FUTURE OF SEXUAL ETHICS

It is no mere popular commentary to say that there is a very real and a very deep crisis in sexual ethics today, and that crisis can be described in this way: There is a widely experienced conflict between institutionalized sexual norms and personal experiences of sexual love which "don't fit the rules" but which are perceived as carrying with them important personal values. Contemporary man is less inclined to judge the moral values of life exclusively in terms of "institutions" which are "there" and available for him, such as marriage with its pre-established set of culturally conditioned standards. People do seek the good, and they seek love, and they find great fulfillment in a good and loving and lasting exclusive personal union. This is man himself who is seeking to realize himself authentically, and this is also the starting-point for the "natural law," for in spite of what may have been

taught about the precepts of the natural law in the past, the natural law should not be seen as something totally pre-fabricated and existing in all its fullness prior to the person and prior to the personal experience.

This is precisely the crisis in sexual ethics: that the experience of sexuality does not match the rather minimal norms and institutions of sexuality. Many contemporaries experience the richness of the former and the impoverishment of the latter, and they wonder as Christians whether the radical demands of love precisely in the non-feeling (a-pathetic) and anti-erotic sexual atmosphere of today³ call for the acknowledgement of sexual standards and institutions differing somewhat from those of the past.

To ask the question is not necessarily to answer the question; but there are some precedents for the legitimacy of the question, not only within contemporary experience, but also within contemporary Catholic theology on marriage. It has become more and more evident today within the Catholic Church that personal loving union is an extremely important value, and that sexual relations are really the expression of a mutual personal giving of self in love. This personal meaning of marriage — the mutual inner molding of two personalities in a loving, two-in-one union — is commonly acknowledged today as the inner meaning of marriage. But this teaching was not commonly held before the present century. Now, if our marital morality has altered so decidedly at this basic level, and if marital morality has been the paradigm for all sexual morality (which can be shown to be the case), then this means that some of our presuppositions on sexual morality in general are definitely altered.

To acknowledge a radical alteration

in moral presuppositions is not necessarily to predict the downfall of all sexual norms. But to refuse to acknowledge this change in perspective in changing cultural circumstances, and to refuse to re-evaluate sexual ethics today may be to reject emerging sexual values and to discourage finding the means for minimizing sexual dis-values. Perhaps we should acknowledge more freely, as did the Fathers of Vatican Council II,⁴ that we have not yet arrived at a definitive understanding of how the various benefits and potentialities offered to man in his sexuality should in every case be synthesized and reconciled.

I suspect that Christian sexual ethics will have a brighter and more helpful future if it begins to emphasize a morality of growth. Contemporary theology has pointed to neglected personal dimensions of the sexual experience, but has done relatively little to relate this to real life. In fact, in many cases they have done little more than reject or alter or qualify norms. We need to move beyond the "up-dating" of norms, in spite of the fact that there is great pressure on the theologian from laity and clergy to remain at that level of discourse. Furthermore, the discussions on situationism and the need to compromise encourage a new casuistry which may serve to relieve consciences in moments of distress but which do little to indicate what the future should hold in store for man who by nature seeks to deepen the personal meaning of his own sexuality. Love is not just a command, it is an inner law that has its own dynamism and its own laws of growth.

A relevant sexual ethic is one which speaks a language of values and thoughtfulness that strikes a chord of recognition in the hearer and challenges him to pursue the good. I believe that such an ethic can be found in the language of morality centering on personal growth

toward sexual maturity and generous love. This growth should not focus on an overly standardized goal, for this would probably signal a bourgeois psycho-emotional mediocrity and a task-centered morality. The emphasis should, instead, be placed on maximizing the growth which the individual is capable of at his level of development without belittling in advance what the law of love will enable him to accomplish in his life.

It seems undeniable from the viewpoint of Scripture and the history of sexual ethics as we have seen it — as well as from that of social anthropology, psychology, philosophy, ethics and theology — that there is a need for specific and concrete norms to govern human sexual behavior, and that these norms need to be inculcated with a certain clarity and firmness as part of a suitable moral pedagogical process. But our dominant heresy in sexual ethics has been a pedagogical one: the teaching that one could avoid moral guilt and be all right with God if he observed the commonly taught sexual prescriptions. That is a practical heresy because it denies the law of man's growth and thwarts the demands of dynamic love.

The future of sexual ethics calls for the development of a Christian sexual morality of growth if today's culturally and historically conditioned experience of life in general and sexual behavior in particular is to be subjected to the radical demands of love.

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1. Much of this can be found explained in Franz Boeckle's article, "Sexualität und sittliche Norm," in *Stimme der Zeit* 80 (1967), 249-267.
2. John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 45.
3. Cf. Rollo May, *Love and Will* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969).
4. *Church in the Modern World*, par. 51, speaking of responsible parenthood.