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Celibacy and androgyny

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After a few meteoric attempts to appropriate its power, the declaration that in Christ there is no more male or female faded into innocuous metaphor, perhaps to await the coming of its proper moment. --Wayne Meeks.

Androgyny seeks to liberate the individual from the confines of the appropriate. -- Caroyn Heilbrun.

Two key concepts are being explored in this essay: celibacy and androgyny. Celibacy is popularly understood as a rejection of anything to do with sex because we assume that God is asexual, and that sex is a gross distraction from an authentic spiritual life. In more positive terms, celibacy is seen as an option to forego sexual pleasure and intimacy in order to dedicate one self more fully to God and to God?s mission of love and service to others. Despite the positive meaning, the anti-sexual asceticism prevails, inhibiting a more informed understanding of this life-option. The call to celibacy needs a fresh appraisal.

Basic to all considerations is the historical fact that people have opted for celibacy throughout much of human history. The evidence seems to suggest that this was short-term rather than for a whole life-time, although examples of the latter can be gleaned among Shamans and other sage-like people, dating back some 20,000 years. A religious/spiritual motivation always seems to accompany this option. And, I suggest that it is that same religious/mystical component that has been grossly misunderstood in more recent millennia.

Before describing what androgyny entails, I wish to challenge the prevailing view of human sexuality as a biologically determined endowment. It seems to me, and to many developmental psychologists, that our sexuality is first and foremost a form of psychic energy and not just a biological capacity with procreation as its primary purpose. The physical and biological dimensions of our sexuality ensue from the psychic foundations. As a psychic phenomenon, sexuality may be described as the sum total of our feelings, moods and emotions as articulated through relational interaction, which the Canadian theologian, Carter Heyward pushes into the spiritual realm by defining sexuality as: ?Our embodied relational response to sacred/erotic power.? The psychic and spiritual aspects become much more transparent and integrated in the life-experience of the androgyne.

I am proposing an understanding of celibacy that may seem very new, but in fact is quite ancient. By revisiting the notion of androgyny, I want to activate a spirituality and theology of celibacy more coherent and congruent for our time.

What is Androgyny?

Labelled by the medical/psychiatric profession as the ultimate state of confusion ? whereby a person is not clear whether one is male or female ? nowadays the notion of androgyny is ridiculed rather than clinically dismissed as deviant. Subsumed under the label of the hermaphrodite it tends to be perceived as an idiosyncratic adoption of maniacs or new-age freaks. Retrieving the positive ? and more ancient ? meaning is not an easy task.

Gender is also a contentious issue of our time, and it is difficult to describe androgyny without resorting to

gender language. In the androgynous state, the biology tends to be clearly demarcated. Contrary to transsexuals, androgynes do not wish to have a sex change; in fact they tend to be quite comfortable in their gendered identity as male or female. What is different is the psychic energy that informs their erotic drives and desires.

Initially, the desired integration may manifest in a man becoming restless and disillusioned with conventional male roles, no longer wishing to play games of competition and male prowess, but desiring a lifestyle of a more cooperative and creative nature. In a woman, it will sometimes become manifest in a desire for greater achievement and competence in a commercial or business role. It is not a case of switching roles, or breaking down more conventional boundaries. Both men and women find themselves drawn to engage in social, relation and professional behaviour which tends to transcend the cultural attributes often identified with a specific gender. And irrespective of what society feels about the newly adopted role, deep inside the androgyne knows a type of ?home-coming? which defies rational explanation.

The inner drive is towards integration and wholeness, motivated in this case not so much by conscious choice as by an inner subconscious urge which is fundamentally spiritual in nature. And it is not a once-and-for-all achievement; it is a life-long process, which merits the status of a life-calling or vocation, as distinct from a goal one reaches through learning and human accomplishment.

The androgyne and mystic seem to have a lot in common; each aspires to a sense of wholeness that transcends all our man-made distinctions and dualisms. Perhaps, St. Paul was alluding to this when he describes the new person in Christ: ?There is neither Jew nor Greek, . . .slave or free, . . . male or female? (Gal.3:28). The mystical dimension helps to articulate and channel the spiritual meaning which is central to androgynous orientation; this may be subconscious rather than conscious and may not be easily integrated with formal religion.

Psycho-sexually, androgynous behaviour is informed by a stronger desire for psychic wholeness rather than driven to perform out of stereotypical, biological conditioning. Because it is difficult to internalise this identity in a culture addicted so rigidly to sexist and gendered stereotypes, androgynes are often labelled as bi-sexuals or transsexuals, and some prematurely adopt these labels.

Celibacy as an androgynous call

I suspect that people called to a celibate vocation effectively embrace an androgynous identity. This is not something they have consciously chosen; more likely it is something that happens in the internal spiritual realm evoking a particular calling or vocation. Were such people always disposed to this calling - already marked out at birth as several ancient cultures claim? I feel unable to offer a meaningful response to this question. Whatever the preconditions governing the vocational call, the consequences remain the same and it is the consequences I am exploring in this essay.

Celibacy in its primordial significance seems to arise from a passionate desire to share more closely in the erotic intimacy of the Divine. God is the supreme lover who allures and captivates the heart of the loved one. This can easily be depicted as a mystical calling for the rare few, with nothing of value or worth for the rest of humanity. I suspect that the opposite may be the case. The celibate fulfils a cultural role ? perhaps a paradoxical one ? exemplifying the ultimacy that is at the heart of all our desiring as a human species. Of course, the vocational motivation may be based on less worthy aspirations, some of which may even be pathological; this is an area for profound and comprehensive discernment.

Despite this divine initiative ? or perhaps precisely because of it ? I wish to suggest that the celibate calling is a highly sexualised one. The celibate may well be the most erotic of all humans, honouring a very ancient understanding of the Divine as a highly eroticised life-force, impregnating the whole of creation. That being the case, two important adjustments need to be made to our thinking. Firstly, God is not a-sexual, and neither is any organism created by God. Secondly, the celibate needs expressive outlets for psycho-sexual energy, which

cannot be adequately or appropriately channelled through sublimation or total abstinence.

On this complex question, ancient cultures may have been far more enlightened than contemporary ones. They provided outlets for the expression and articulation of sexual desire other than those of the monogamous, married relationship. They seem to have understood better the intense and amorphous energy of human sexuality and facilitated its articulation through rituals and ceremonies whereby people were sexually intimate, inclusive of genital expression (not to be reduced to biological intercourse). We glean evidence for this through ancient Chinese and Indian art; through spiritually-informed traditions like that of the Tantric philosophy of ancient India; in the iconography of early Hinduism; through a vast range of initiation rites among indigenous peoples, and through the courtly customs of mediaeval Europe.

That celibacy will involve an option for non-marriage makes a lot of practical and pastoral sense. That it must also imply total abstinence from sexual intimacy, is less compelling in our time. What may be most shocking about this claim is my differentiation between marriage and sexual expression. As indicated at the beginning of this essay, human sexuality is a process of growing more deeply into our evolving humanity - which for most of our time on earth was not confined to monogamous marriage - and there are several contemporary indications that this equation will not prevail in future.
(P.S. To defend or substantiate the contents of this paragraph would distract from the central message of the essay itself. I simply want to invite the reader to a place of deeper reflection from which may arise a more fruitful dialogue. I also want to include rather than dismiss sexual experiences which some celibates consider integral to their human and spiritual growth. As we dialogue around this sensitive and urgent topic, we must not assume that being sexual always entails genitality, nor should genitality be equated with sexual intercourse).

How our culture might provide appropriate outlets for the expression and articulation of celibate sexual intimacy is a further consideration that need not detain us now. Once we get the underlying vision clear, informed by a larger sense of culture, history and especially sexuality itself, then it will be easier to initiate the dialogue that will need to take place, delineate necessary boundaries, discern moral guidelines, and generate the good-will to provide the necessary support structures. The inevitable fear is that this will release a new wave of promiscuity and make a mockery of sexual morality at every level. My concern is to clear up the immorality and promiscuity that have been far too prevalent, and perversely covered over, for far too long. (see, Jordan 2000). Honesty and transparency is what I am ultimately pursuing.

Celibacy and Priesthood

In popular Catholic culture, priesthood inevitably means a celibate lifestyle. I believe this has obfuscated the real meaning of celibacy and continues to make a meaningful retrieval both problematic and confusing. Long before a dominantly male priesthood evolved (about 7,000 years ago), celibacy was extensively practised. Celibacy did not begin with the Catholic Church, nor even with the monastic systems of the other great religions. Celibacy should not be equated with any one religious sub-group, particularly one so rooted in ecclesiastical structure.

Formal priesthood is probably too rigidified, institutionalised and ascetically based to appropriate the mystical embrace of androgynous values. Those committed to the monastic/vowed life stand a better chance of witnessing authentically, but that role too has been co-opted into the ecclesiastical/religious system and, correspondingly, has been seriously disenfranchised in terms of what it has to offer. The congealed clericalised culture is just not amenable to this new and daring vision.

In the light of recent debates, especially in USA, one wonders if greater recognition of homosexuality among Catholic priests and clerical students would be a step towards the integration of the androgyne in priestly celibates. It may help, but it could also confuse. Revisioning celibacy to accommodate those of homosexual orientation is a desirable goal, but it leaves deeper issues unrecognised and unresolved. In most cases, I suspect

homosexuality is not the problem; human sexuality is. Because of the heavy impact of dualistic thinking in our Western world, unconsciously we try to resolve problems by switching from one pole to the other. In the case of celibacy, I think we are in great danger of missing the deeper challenge, namely the archetypal lure to an androgynous lifestyle!

Celibacy contributing to abuse?

In recent years, the Catholic church in USA ? and elsewhere ? has been rocked by sex scandals, leaving innocent victims scarred for life and offending priests labelled as perverts. According to the report of Feb., 2004 from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, 4,392 priests had been accused of sexual offences between 1950 and 2000. Their victims were predominantly young boys between 12-14 years of age. The problem was attributed, firstly, to inadequate screening when entering seminary suggesting that these were basically immature men with serious sexual dysfunction. And, secondly, to irresponsible Bishops who did not take appropriate action once their sexual deviance was noticed.

Most reports on priest sexual abuse follow this line of reasoning. Paedophilia (or more accurately, the abuse of minors, ephebophilia) is widely regarded to be a form of psychopathology, the origins of which are often traced to early family history or traumatic experiences in early childhood. Few attempts have been made to understand the phenomenon in a non-medicalised context. Nor does the Catholic Church seem to want to ask one obvious question: why the focus on young males, in a culture where females rather than males are typically the victims of sexual abuse? Some commentators distinguish between homoerotic and homosexual; it seems to me that the former embodies a great deal more spiritual and psychic intent than the later, and I am not convinced that the one leads automatically to the other. A great deal has also been written about integrating the inner child, a task that may be much more formidable, but also liberating, for the androgyne. For these, and a range of other reasons, I suggest the attraction of young males for some male celibates, needs a much more profound analysis.

Naively, we assume that a homosexual leaning is at the root of the problem of clerical abuse. To me, at least, it seems fairly obvious that celibate sexuality itself, and the repressive clerical culture in which it is (mal)nourished, is the problem, precisely because neither the Church nor the wider culture is capable of recognising or affirming what the call to celibacy is really about. The so-called paedophile priest may be the ultimate scapegoat in one of the greatest cover-ups known to modern culture.

Eugene Kennedy has taken the bold step to describe celibate sexuality in terms of an archetypal wounding, which presumably can only be healed by tender and compassionate care. And if such positive regard is not forthcoming, then obviously the woundedness grows infectious and can create great havoc for priests themselves as well as for others. While Kennedy attempts to shift the focus to the archetypal level (I know of nobody else who has attempted this), I have some reservations about his starting point.

I don?t believe that people enter priesthood in a wounded state - particularly those who feel a deep sense of calling. I believe the majority enter as quite wholesome people who become wounded because of the internal corruption of the clericalised-institutionalised system with which they affiliate. Nor should we lay all the blame at the feet of a culture of clericalised power which Kennedy seems to suggest is the heart of the problem. I blame the wider culture of repression which is unable to discern the deeper meaning of human sexuality, for everybody, celibates included.

Celibacy: The Future?

The call to celibacy has flourished for several millennia; it will continue to flourish despite all the obstacles to its development, most of which are religious in nature. Current evidence suggests that it may become more diffuse in the wider population as growing numbers of women particularly opt for single living - for a large part if not the whole of their lives. This I describe as cultural celibacy, a single life-style, frequently adopted in order

to be more successful in a career or in another life-project.

This is very different from vocational celibacy, where the underlying motivation ? conscious or otherwise - is a desire to serve, typically informed by religious faith. This is the calling which I suspect is closely related to the psycho-sexual identity of being androgynous. The service at stake is not just to the cloistered life of prayer and asceticism, nor, alternatively, to the unstinting commitment to work for the liberation of the poor and oppressed. These are external expressions of something much deeper and more profound.

The service envisaged in the celibate call goes to the very core of the divine erotic energy, releasing and birthing forth the capacity for right relationships at every level of creation. There are cosmic and planetary dimensions to this call. This is big stuff, and not for the light-hearted! And this is not just about human beings, nor must it ever be restricted to one or other religion, church or denomination.

Like sexuality itself, we have vilified celibacy in a crude, barbaric form of reductionism. That very calling, which is about engagement with the divine erotic in the whole of creation has been trivialised and domesticated amid the ascetical distortions of a bankrupt sexuality. In order to redeem the true archetypal meaning of this vocation, we firstly need to reclaim what sexuality itself is about in its true cultural and spiritual meaning. Only, then can we hope to understand and appreciate the call to celibacy, not some irresponsible opting-out of life, but a life-option of incredible richness, when understood and embraced in a more authentic context.

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