

YAHWEH versus EROS

the animal is often the pre-stage of the god (Carl Jung)

I have often thought that if the practice of religion could be a purely disembodied, ethereal experience, able to disregard the body and its desires, we would find the task a lot easier. Religion just can't seem to make up its mind what to do with the body, either to repress its incessant voice or to transform sexual expression into some sort of semi-religious activity. The former attitude has played its role in a series of shameful sexual abuse claims against religious officials and the latter approach is not acceptable in mainstream religion. Both repression and celebration currently have their adherents. Christian fundamentalist churches, like Hillsong in Sydney and Paradise in Adelaide, continue to attract many young people despite imposing conservative sexual prohibitions such as no sex before marriage. Other believers though yearn for a more embodied spiritual belief. For them, Christian ritual has become empty, meaningless, and ethereal.

For example at the 2001 Census, more than 20,000 people in Australia identified as Pagan and according to Dr Douglas Ezzy, Senior Lecturer in

Sociology at the University of Tasmania, this might include about 10,000 people, many of them young, who call themselves Witches. They celebrate bodily pleasure as part of a religious experience, sometimes practising nude and even occasionally with ceremonial sex but always within the law. These are the people who are searching for an expression of religion which does not separate body and soul. Dr Ezzy, who teaches units on new forms of magical belief and spiritual experience in contemporary Australia, believes too that a traditional separation of the body and soul has been 'at the heart of our current environmentally destructive activities and our failure to care for others.' No matter where we direct our gaze, it seems that religion is still burdened by the weight of this dualism, trying to balance what are interpreted as competing demands of body and spirit. The pendulum of bodily desire has always swung from one extreme to the other in the history of religious belief.

When I was preparing to be a Catholic priest in the 1960s, theological training was firmly dedicated to repressing and controlling 'sinful' bodily desire and humiliating the body and its demands. I still recall the bizarre advice given by our professor of Moral Theology who warned us about situations to avoid during our summer holidays: 'If you are in a group of people and a woman falls over, don't ever pick her up. Let someone else do that. Otherwise it may lead to an occasion of sin.' There were further admonitions about riding in cars alone

with women but strangely nothing about picking up men who might fall over. Perhaps it's unjust now to retrospectively caricature the sexual education given in those days to student priests but it certainly indicated a profound and disturbing misunderstanding of human sexuality and the principles of human development.

Somehow, despite my own sexual immaturity, I managed to slip through the cracks in seminary training and it was not until I graduated as a priest and journeyed into the real world, that my own sexual awakenings began. Emboldened by my training and buoyed up by my own ideals, I was determined to avoid intimacy at all costs but quickly discovered that loneliness was the price to pay.

I was a Catholic priest for eighteen years. I taught what the church demanded. I warned about the dangers of desire and repressed it in myself. Now I live as an openly gay man in a satisfying relationship for more than twenty years, much more in touch now with my sexual needs and desires but no less spiritual in my yearnings. I'm still passionately on a spiritual pilgrimage, still suffering a nagging mystical 'toothache', which won't go away, still whistling in the night for the soul, which has slipped its lead like a runaway dog. I can hardly believe now that I am the same person, nurtured in a strict Catholic family,

educated by nuns and brothers, yet now fifty years later, one who champions sexual and erotic expression as a necessary part of spiritual maturity.

Perhaps my first mistake in those years was to allow myself to be brainwashed into a sort of schizophrenic separation of body and soul, repressing the body and its needs instead of celebrating them. Maybe that's why I finally 'derailed' off the institutional tracks, after deciding that I must find a way to celebrate the body and its desires in order to live a more fully developed life.

Traditional Christianity has always been uncompromising in its separation of body and soul. The latter was something noble and pure and the body somehow inferior, an enemy that threatened to hijack the soul and drag it down into sinfulness and guilt. The body in this tradition has always been at the service of the soul, ministering to its needs and subjugating its longings to a higher spiritual good, virginity the highest vocation in the church and chastity the prerequisite for holding official positions. Homosexuality was merely an aberration and even now still regarded as a moral perversion according to the dominant religions of the world.

Of course this anxiety over the body is not an attitude which surfaced overnight in the Christian tradition but one which evolved over many centuries; a particular belief pattern which prevailed over all others and went on to dominate Christian thought and practice. In the second century A.D., when

Christianity was a mere adolescent, the Roman Empire was already establishing its own stringent codes of sexual restraint, which the early Church would learn to imitate and perfect. The Romans believed that the loss of the vital spirit in men was linked to male orgasm and by the fourth century, castration, which we now regard as an outrageous aberration, had become prevalent in Christian circles. This was the sort of world which in Christianity was developing. How had these followers of a compassionate Jesus come to see self-mutilation as necessary for salvation?

An established dualism of body and soul was also present in traditional Judaism and Jewish communities like the Essenes, an all-male community of celibates, derived from a long tradition of misogyny, who were taking sexual abstinence to a new level. Women were seen as the seducers of men, as the enemy who were making disruptive claims on men and hindering their spiritual development. It is fair to say that this misogyny had leaked through into the Moral Theology of the 1960s which I had studied. In the late second century Carthage, the preacher Tertullian was to describe women as 'the Devil's gateway.' Eve after all had been responsible for the fall of Adam and women, he concluded, were still in danger of leading men away from union with God. No wonder that the renunciation of sexual intercourse came to be seen as indispensable for regaining that lost link to the divine and for transcending the

power of death. These were dangerous outcomes for the status of women and placed bodily desire under enormous suspicion and contempt.

Of course in other parts of the world contrary customs and attitudes to the body and sexuality were already forming. Some religions had elevated the phallus to the status of a god. These strong traditions, which thrived throughout Egypt, Greece, India and northern Europe, celebrated the phallus as a symbol of creative energy. In Egypt as well as the Greco-Roman world, the phallus was considered to have attributes powerful enough to dispel dark and demonic forces. Did these cultures have an understanding of the human condition, which we Christians had conveniently papered over?

Peter Brown in 'The Body and Society' argues that 'the second and third centuries A.D. witnessed two silent revolutions that would determine the future development of religion in Europe and the Near East—the rise to dominance of the rabbis within Judaism, and the creation of a strict division between clergy and laity in the Christian Church.' (Brown, p. 142). In both circumstances there was a movement towards developing an elite and in the case of the Christian Church, an increasingly celibate one. In the Judaic tradition, women had already been excluded from the central rabbinical activities. Taboos surrounding bodily functions such as menstruation, intercourse or night-emissions were now

emerging. The body's needs were becoming an insurmountable barrier to legitimate religious experience.

By the fourth century when Ambrose was bishop of Milan, the dualism of body and soul was well established within Christian tradition. For him the body was 'a perilous mudslick, on which the firm treads of the soul's resolve might slip and tumble at any moment.' (Brown, p. 349) A generation later, these writings of Ambrose would provide Augustine with the ammunition for his belief that there was an intimate relationship between the act of intercourse and the transmission of original sin and thus determined the future direction of Catholicism in the Latin West, establishing the policy of a body/soul dualism. From this time on, the connected notions of sexual renunciation, celibacy and virginity settled into a comfortable domicile within a tradition, which ultimately emerged from the Christian world, which had replaced the Roman Empire and travelled on into the Middle Ages. These ideas ultimately found their way into the religious traditions of modern Europe, America and by association Australia.

It needs to be acknowledged that despite these strictures, the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries were periods of greater openness and tolerance in European society with regard to sexual expression. The historian John Boswell says this was a time 'when experimentation was encouraged, new ideas eagerly sought (and) expansion favoured in both the practical and intellectual realms of

life.' (Boswell, p.269). The huge volume of literature of this period attests to the fact that twelfth century clerics, both monastic and secular, like Saints Anselm and Aelred, supported and were involved in highly passionate friendships. However, despite these grass-root tendencies, the tide was already turning against erotic attachments and clerical marriage and in 1123 the First Lateran Council of the Church declared such marriages invalid.

The uneasy frisson engendered between a natural expression of the sexual and what Church authority considers sinful, has always been a part of church history. It still exists. A former priest, who entered the seminary at the age of twelve, recently explained to me how he left the priesthood because he felt his emotional life was at risk, caught between these twin demands. For fourteen years as a priest he struggled to honour his commitment to celibacy but finally 'made a conscious choice to continue my life and work as a priest without burdening myself with more of this struggle, to be sexually active when and how appropriate opportunities offered.' Many clerics still remain within the system having made similar compromises. For them it means dealing with feelings of guilt, dishonesty and hypocrisy, hardly the basis for a mature and fulfilling life. This former priest acknowledges that 'a large proportion of the twenty-seven years since I resigned from the priesthood has been spent in restoring some sort of balance in my emotional, physical and sexual life.'

The Christian tradition still regards the body and its desires as an impediment to spiritual progress. Sexual needs, if not feared and repressed, must be circumscribed with rules and strictures and then given full expression only within a structured context, a union that is strictly heterosexual. Eroticism, suspect at the best of times, was never something to be celebrated for its own sake. Yahweh and Eros were uneasy bed-partners. Celibacy remains a *sine qua non* for official entrance into Catholic clerical life despite the reality that the numbers of candidates prepared to sign on for lifetime of celibacy are diminishing. Even discussion on the viability of celibacy is now forbidden. The rigidity of the church's centralised authority however puts it out of step with newer scientific and social understandings of the role of sexual health and maturity in our lives. The presumptions of Tertullian, Ambrose and Augustine can no longer stand up to the forensic examination of modern psychology and the discovery that mature sexual development is a necessary foundation for a wider human maturity. Of course celibacy, willingly embraced as a preference, may lead to full human development but in my experience, only in exceptional cases.

I left the priesthood (and the church) in the 1980's because I realised that my struggle to uphold the ideals of celibacy had led me down a path of depression, paranoia and into a deep well of unhappiness. I was successful in

repressing the possibilities of intimate relationships but in the process, my loneliness and rage became overwhelming. Often I could barely find the energy to get out of bed in the morning to face the day, a sure sign of my developing depression. Surely Yahweh the all-powerful God of the Old Testament, let alone the more loving God of the New Testament, did not expect me to live this sort of life.

Soon after leaving, I came across the writings of Carl Jung, who did much to help reconcile science and religion. He was a man who regarded the 'inner' journey as life's greatest adventure. He called that search 'the process of individuation' and for him this route had to involve the integration of the 'shadow' or repressed, shameful elements into our lives. To deny these 'shadow' elements would lead to unhappiness as my own life had verified. Jung believed that the work of 'individuation' was essential for sanity and by association spiritual growth. At that time, my own greatest fear—and guilty desire—was to be sexually intimate with another man. I still feel gratitude to my counsellor at the time who encouraged me to follow this desire through to its conclusion, to embrace the erotic rather than flee from it. This advice turned my seminary training on its head, but for me it was a path out of despair and unhappiness.

In my own novel *Towards a Distant Sea*, published in 2005 and partly based on my own experiences, I explore this dilemma through the experiences of a

young, idealistic, yet sexually and emotionally naïve priest, adrift in a violent and sensual world, for which he is unprepared and ill-equipped. One reviewer described the story as 'a struggle between the priest's physical and spiritual nature, magnified by the heat, humidity, carnality and casual sensuality of his new home.'

I have come to believe that the rule of celibacy enforced upon sexually immature men as a prerequisite of clerical service, has played a major role in the terrible epidemic of sexual abuse by clergy who were just struggling individuals stuck in a time-warp of sexual adolescence. The perpetrators of these terrible abuses cannot all be bad people; they are often highly dedicated but underdeveloped sexually and psychologically. The system has failed them too as much as it failed those in the care of that adolescent clergy.

Jung believed that to deny or camouflage feelings like erotic desire, anger, and grief gives them a power of their own, greater than they deserve, a power, which sometimes can threaten to overwhelm. Jung seemed to be telling me then: Face the repressed parts of yourself and embrace them as friends. Then just get on with your life. He believed that the 'shadow' or unconscious self often reveals itself in dreams as a male figure, merely somewhat inferior, primitive, unadapted and awkward, not wholly bad and so I began taking more notice of my dreams.

My spiritual journey paid attention to integrating the 'shadows' not repressing or denying them, to track them down and embrace them as unexpected and supportive friends. This process of reversal took me some years as I kept a diary of my dreams and gradually learnt to identify these shadow-people as new and welcomed companions. Anger. Desire. Sorrow. Lust. Slowly I grew to be at ease with my sensual and erotic feelings and not to repress them.

My own journey was by no means unique. Earlier this year a group of former priests who had been members of the order in which I had worked, surveyed as many of their former companions they were able to contact around the world. One hundred and ninety-six former priests replied and shared their reflections on the reasons they had left. Overwhelmingly these men always recognised the psychological damage they had been inflicting on themselves by repressing expressions of intimacy and sensuality. One former priest, Brendan admitted that as a priest he had been a worker who did not allow people to get in the way of his work. 'I worked hard but did not really belong to anyone and no one belonged to me,' he says. 'Celibacy protected me from the harsh realities that flow from being emotionally attached to others and from having to trust another implicitly and sufficiently to surrender to him or to her, the power to hurt, damage or even destroy me.'

Another former priest Frank, now married with his own family, admits that he was simply scared of women. 'I kept my relationship very much at the superficial level, holding women at bay by making jokes and putting them down.' Part of his fear he says was that 'I was very easily aroused sexually in the company of women and really saw them as a threat to my continuation in the priesthood.' Gary is another former priest and a friend from seminary days. He says that he 'went through psychic hell to the point of emotional breakdown to avoid my sexuality.' He has come to believe that the 'subtle (or not so subtle) authoritarianism of the church rests on the repression of sexuality and keeping this in place by guilt and shame.' The experience he says helped him to turn his pain into 'making a contribution to people's personal and social well-being.' He now works as a psychotherapist and a Bioenergetic therapist, a body-centred approach to therapy founded by Alexander Lowen, a student of Wilhelm Reich, himself a student of Freud. For Reich, sexual repression is an essential building-block in creating fascist and authoritarian societies. Like Jung, Reich also understood the importance of people's ability to access the shadow-side and get in touch with their 'devils' or what he regarded as the bound-up life-force in the body.

Jung understood that the 'animal' (or raw desire) was often the pre-stage of the god and to repress these desires totally could be dangerous for the health

of the psyche. What was true for the individual had a parallel in society and the historical repression of the erotic in Western society has contributed to the development of an enormous pornographic industry where women in particular become the currency of exploitation. By repressing the erotic we have given it a role greater than it deserves. Sexual desire, because it is such a powerful drive is always open to appropriation by abusers and exploiters for selfish or commercial gain.

‘I look into the face of the beast and know he is my brother—myself’ (p. 196) says Frances G. Wickes in *The Inner World of Choice*, a book, which introduced me to the implications of Jung’s psychology for the spiritual search. For Jung, the search for a spiritual meaning rides the same track as the journey to mental and spiritual maturity. This is one and the same pilgrimage. A healthy dose of the sensual and erotic, integrated into life was to lead to my new understanding of ‘god’. I now believe that the spiritual human being is also a sensual, erotic being, and each facet depends on the other. By integrating the erotic into our lives we become more complete, more spiritual. Other religions had already taken this alternate path to the spiritual. Tantra for instance, is one of several esoteric traditions rooted in the religions of India with both Hindu and Buddhist forms. In this tradition, sex is a means to release the divinity that lies within. For a Tantrik the purpose of sex is not the orgasm per se, but the moment

of thoughtlessness that one experiences at the peak of orgasm. At that point the mind is truly thoughtless, and to achieve and understand that state is the goal of any yogi or Tantrik on the path to spiritual understanding. Perhaps this state has a similar parallel in the ecstatic experiences of certain Christian saints.

Deny the shadowy Beast and it will reassert itself in inappropriate ways. Unfortunately we still live with the inheritance of institutional religion's 'blind-spot.' Repressing rather than celebrating bodily desire sees some established religions still uneasy with facing issues such as contraception, abortion, the role of women, gay rights, the prevention of AIDS and overpopulation, all important issues of our time. A fundamentalist interpretation of religion, be it Christian, Jewish or Islamic with its underlying denial of the sensual or erotic, threatens to suck us back into a slipstream of neo-Tertullianism demanding repression, not celebration of the sensual, erotic part of our nature. I believe this would be at our personal and collective peril.

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