

their intellect, their scholarship and their spiritual integrity. Let us dare to be wrong as we struggle to write our thoughts and our understanding of theology. We are all called to be theologians. Let us dare to dream our place in the church as one of full acceptance of women, created equally in the image of God. Let us dare to be prophetic voices, as we dare to discern the signs of the times.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Orthodox Women and their Participation in the Church* (report of the Agapia consultation), Geneva, WCC, 1976, p.17.
- <sup>2</sup> Report from the Levadia meeting on "Orthodox Women in a United Europe", Nov. 1994.
- <sup>3</sup> Eva C. Topping, *Holy Mothers of Orthodoxy*, Minneapolis, Light and Life, 1987, p.127.
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted by Susannah Hertzell, *A Voice for Women: The Women's Department of the World Council of Churches*, Geneva, WCC, 1981, p.18.
- <sup>5</sup> John Chryssavgis, *Homily on Luke 8:41-56*.
- <sup>6</sup> Cited in *The Lives of the Spiritual Mothers*, Buena Vista CO, Holy Apostles Convent, 1991, pp.373-81.
- <sup>7</sup> Eva C. Topping, "It is Time to Speak", in *MaryMartha*, Vol. 1, no. 4, 1992, p.8.
- <sup>8</sup> Cited by Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *The Ministry of Women in the Church*, Redondo Beach CA, Oakwood Publications, 1991.

## Human Sexuality and the Body

### An Orthodox Perspective

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In his *Divine Names*, St Dionysius the Areopagite calls on us to "contemplate a certain one and simple nature of the peaceful Union, unifying all things to Itself and to themselves and to each other" (10.2). While the unity referred to here is that of God, Dionysius outlines a framework of how to relate to all that is around us. We are called to unify our thoughts, actions and relationships and to direct them towards God. All things must be understood in relation to God, to oneself and to those around us. This framework in fact closely resembles the Orthodox understanding of the holy Trinity. Each person of the Trinity exhibits a different hypostasis while maintaining the same essence. Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate to one another by way of mutual indwelling – *perichoresis*.

Just as Orthodox trinitarian theology applies to all aspects of church life, so too it applies to an understanding of human sexuality. The Orthodox tradition would disagree with those who think that sexuality has no place in Christian anthropology. For many, the problem here begins with the fact that sexuality is directly related to the body. A misguided understanding of the human body has grown out of remnants of Greek philosophical dualism combined with misinterpretations of scripture fostered by Gnostic influences and bolstered by selective reading of monastic texts. By contrast, Orthodox worship and life have always seen the person as a whole, well-integrated being though not complete in any sense, since perfection always awaits us.

Especially in the dialogue *Phaedo*, Plato draws a sharp distinction between the body and the soul. The body is the tomb of the soul (65d), leading it astray (65b). The contemplative life of the soul is better without the distraction of the body (65c). While there are times when Plato sees the harmony of beauty in the body and soul,<sup>1</sup> he more often describes the body as inferior to the soul.<sup>2</sup> It is a source of evil and an impediment to the soul's attaining of truth (*Phaedo*, 66). The soul is

superior to the body (*Phaedo*, 94; *Timaeus*, 34c) and in opposition to the body (*Phaedo*, 80, 94).

Inevitably, this understanding of soul and body influenced many of the fathers of the church, who had been schooled in the writings of Plato and the Greek philosophers. Moreover, some passages in the New Testament might be read in a way that would lead to seeing the body as distinct from the soul and a cause of sin. Consider, for example, one of the gospel accounts of Jesus' teaching on adultery:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall not commit adultery." But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than for your whole body go into hell (Matt. 5:27-30).

This passage refers back to the Ten Commandments. While the consequences of Jesus' message here were not meant to be taken literally,<sup>3</sup> this passage can be interpreted in different ways. One understanding could simply be that it is the members of the body which are the cause of sin and therefore unnecessary if one truly wants to be saved. It is possible to see in this passage the beginnings of a disembodied understanding of the human being. A distinction is being made between the body and something else – whether that "something else" is the soul, Jesus does not say. So, even though the passage concludes by referring to the desire to save the whole body, it is easy to see how it could be misconstrued as supporting the inferiority of the body.

The writings of St Paul have also been interpreted as denigrating the body or the flesh. A number of passages portray the passions of the flesh as contributing to the death of the individual (cf. Rom. 7:5; 8:5,8; 2 Cor. 10:3; Gal. 5:16,24). The flesh is set in opposition to the work of God, for "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God" (Rom. 8:7). Through the teachings of the Desert Fathers and the 4th-century Christian anthropologists a clear distinction between "flesh" and "body" would come about.

But a closer reading may reveal a more nuanced understanding of what St Paul was trying to say in these passages. Many of them are set within the context of a relationship with Jesus Christ. In the passage just cited, for example, Paul has been speaking of a breach in one's fellowship with God:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things

of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace (Rom. 8:5,6).

The mind which is set on the flesh is the mind which has no relationship with God. This mind idolizes the flesh or the worldly way rather than the way of God. And the mind cannot attain salvation without God. Thus the term "flesh" in these texts should not be understood as a denigrating term for the body but as a reference to one's vulnerability to temptation.

The flesh is fallen and sinful human nature rather than the human nature which was originally created to dwell in communion with God. This is supported by Galatians 5:18-21, which outlines the "works of the flesh" as including idolatry, jealousy, anger, selfishness, envy and dissension. The flesh is seen as the body/soul structure which has fallen.

"Flesh" is not the same as "body". The term flesh... signifies whatever within us is sinful and opposed to God; thus it is not only the body but the soul in fallen man that has become fleshly and carnal.<sup>4</sup>

The desires of the flesh are the desires of the creature. The spirit is seen as the body/soul structure redeemed, or even better, the desires of the Creator.

St Paul would agree with this understanding of the human person. He portrays the body/soul structure as an integrated unity in 1 Thessalonians 5:23: "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." According to St Paul, the body, soul and spirit working together make up the whole human being. Or, to quote Bishop Kallistos Ware again, "the body... is an integral part of human personhood".<sup>5</sup>

Yet Christian writers partial to dualistic Platonic or Neo-Platonic philosophy have introduced a distinction between soul and body, denouncing any physical or material aspect of the nature of the human being. Augustine wrote that "whoever desires to restore himself to the state in which he was made by God... should condemn all corporeal things... There is simply no other way of saving the soul or of renewing it, or of reconciling it with its maker."<sup>6</sup> Similar comments can be found in the Gnostic literature: "Salvation belongs only to the soul; the body is by nature corruptible"; "The human body [is] an hindrance to gnosis with God."<sup>7</sup>

A selective reading of the monastic literature could also affect one's understanding of the unity of body and soul. St John Climacus refers in his *Ladder* to the body as enemy and the flesh as ungrateful and treach-

erous friend (Step 7 and Step 9); elsewhere he calls the body a gross and savage monster (Step 26). St Maximos the Confessor says the soul is nobler than the body (*Centuries on Charity*, 1.7); and Ilias the Presbyter urges his readers to reflect on the wretchedness to which the body is subject (*Gnomic Anthology*, 3.8).<sup>8</sup> According to St Thalassios the Libyan, it is the soul's task to guide the body; and St Peter of Damascus says the soul must use the body according to its own wishes.<sup>9</sup>

Such a selective reading misinterprets the monastic writings as a whole. From the earliest days of monasticism, we find St Antony acknowledging that the body is neither evil nor responsible for its misuse, but created for a good purpose, so that it needs only to return to its original nature. At the same time the movements of the soul include pride, self-glorification, insolence, hatred and envy.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while distinguishing body and soul, St Antony maintains the unity of the person, since both body and soul have their faults. Since all monastic texts refer back in one way or another to the teachings of St Antony, a closer examination of the writings of the above-mentioned fathers would reveal that they are functioning within the tradition of the church and, more specifically, were referring to the fallen body.

By the end of the fourth century, several very important Christian anthropological texts had appeared. The two most valuable were perhaps those by St Gregory of Nyssa: *On the Making of Man*, a completion of the *Hexameron* of his brother St Basil, and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, a dialogue with his sister St Macrina. A third, *On the Nature of Man*, by Gregory's less well-known contemporary Bishop Nemesius of Emesa, was considered well into the mediaeval period also to be a work of St Gregory. All three texts look into the human person in the light of the growing medical understanding of the time – St Gregory from a more scriptural and philosophical perspective, Bishop Nemesius from a more systematic point of view.

While the fathers of the church may differ on whether the human being is tripartite (body, soul and spirit) or bipartite (body and soul), their understanding of the unity of the person is the same. St Gregory writes:

For our purpose was to show that the seminal cause of our constitution is neither a soul without a body nor a body without a soul, but that from animated and living bodies, it is generated at the first as a living and animate being, and that our humanity takes it and cherishes it like a nursing with the resources she herself possesses, and it thus grows on both sides and makes its growth manifest corresponding in either part (*On the Making of Man*, 30.29).

Body and soul are viewed as an integrated unity which expresses human life. The physical body is not a component of the person, but the

total person's mode of existence. And this unity is important for the place of the human being in the world. In the words of Bishop Kallistos Ware:

Man is able to exercise a mediating role [between the noetic and material realms] only because his human nature is essentially and fundamentally a unity... If his body were not part of his true self, but only a piece of clothing which he will eventually lay aside, or a prison from which he is seeking to escape – then man could not properly act as mediator. Man spiritualizes the creation first of all by spiritualizing his own body and offering it to God... In spiritualizing the body, man does not thereby dematerialize it; on the contrary, it is the human vocation to manifest the spiritual in and through the material... The body is an integral part of the human person.<sup>11</sup>

But this is no news to Orthodox Christians, given the importance of icons in the life of Orthodox churches.

The soul does not reject the body, but uses it for “every good work”.<sup>12</sup> Body and soul work together for the salvation of the human being. Sin is the result of poor choices, not the result of the physical nature of the human being.<sup>13</sup> But most importantly, sin is defined as a separation from God.

If the body is not sinful in and of itself, what does this say about sexuality? Much of our conversation on sexual love is tainted not so much by wrong ideas and practices, as by “dissection of life, where physical activity is detached from the life of the spirit or the life of the spirit is detached from bodily experience”.<sup>14</sup> We must look at sexuality or sexual life as an activity that involves the whole person, body and soul and spirit, rather than simply as an activity that involves our biological self. And here we return to St Dionysius the Areopagite: our sexual actions involve not only ourselves, but also our relationships to those around us and to God.

By not allowing God to take his proper place in our decision-making, we run the risk of sinning, of separation from God. When we exclude God, we will eventually replace him with something else, either a physical love or lover, and we engage in a form of idolatry which leaves no place for God. God becomes incidental to our life, taking a back seat to all our actions and to our desire to have more and more, a desire which really is reserved for love of God. Thus we start down the road of sexual obsession.

But sexual activity viewed in the context of love, in which God is not only the witness to but the source of our ability to love, is not obsession but a healthy expression of who God has created us to be. To love truly, in body, soul and spirit, is to move beyond oneself and beyond the other

person to embrace God – which is the same as embracing the whole world. Our ability to engage in physical love is an activity sanctioned by God, since we are his creation and our body is “the temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19).

Our sexual actions also involve others besides ourselves and God. We need others in our life in order to know ourselves. God created woman so that man would not be alone (Gen. 2:18). To behave in a promiscuous way, to engage in sexual activity with just anyone, is to see the other person as an object, not as a person. When we see sexual activity as simply an action, devoid of any relationship with the other person, we are reduced to an animalistic state. We are reduced to a series of parts instead of the unity which is called person. There must be a meaningful, committed relationship between two people if sexual activity is to be that which works for the betterment and not the degradation of the person. Therefore sexual activity must be placed within the full sacramental context of personal relationship, this relationship being defined as a unity of thoughts and actions which takes into consideration one’s relationship with God, oneself and the other person.

One of the clearest affirmations of sexual activity can be found in the prayers recited during the service of crowning:

Holy God,  
 who formed man from dust  
 and from his rib built up woman,  
 whom you yoked to him as a helper for him,  
 for it seemed pleasing to your Majesty  
 that man should not be alone on the earth;  
 Now, Master, stretch out your hand  
 from your holy dwelling place,  
 and join your servant and your servant,  
 so that by you woman is betrothed to man.  
 Yoke them in oneness of mind, crown them in one flesh,  
 give freely to them the fruit of the womb,  
 the enjoyment of fair children.<sup>15</sup>

Sexual activity, the coming together of man and woman as one flesh, is crowned. If this activity were seen as sinful, it is doubtful that it would have been included in this prayer, much less the biblical text from which it comes (Gen. 2:24).

We need to reclaim our own Orthodox understanding of sexuality, which differs from that of other Christians. For those of us who live in countries where Orthodox Christians are in the minority, it is easy to be influenced by teachings on sexuality which are neither patristic nor liturgical in origin.

In the churches, the most common ways of dealing with sexuality seem to be silence and censorship. Either the topic is not addressed (apparently in the hope that it will go away) or strict rules and regulations regarding behaviour are imposed. This moralistic approach is simply not Orthodox. Our approach must always be relational, following the teachings of St Dionysius. How we live affects our relationship with others, with ourselves and with God. This is the framework in which we will find the freedom and love that come from God.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. for example *Republic*, 3.402d.
- <sup>2</sup> Cf. *Epis.*, 8.355b, *Laws*, 5.728d, 743c, 10.892a, 12.959a.
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. James L. Mays, ed., *Harper’s Bible Commentary*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1988, p.957.
- <sup>4</sup> Bishop Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990, p.79.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p.64.
- <sup>6</sup> *On the Greatness of the Soul*, 3.4.
- <sup>7</sup> The former is a Gnostic teaching described by Irenaeus in *Adv. Haer.*, 1.24.5; the latter, from the *Hermetic Tractate 7*, is cited by Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures*, New York, Doubleday, 1987, p.462.
- <sup>8</sup> Translation from *The Philokalia*, Vol. 3, trs. G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, K. Ware, London, Faber & Faber, 1984, p.48.
- <sup>9</sup> St Thalassios, “On Love, Self-Control and Life in Accordance with the Intellect”, tr. in *ibid.*, Vol. 2, 1981, p.308; St Peter, “The Sixth Stage of Contemplation”, tr. in *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p.135.
- <sup>10</sup> St Antony, *Letter 1.49*: 1.74; tr. in S. Rubenson, *The Letters of St Antony*, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1995, pp.200.202.
- <sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp.63f.
- <sup>12</sup> St Peter of Damascus, “The Knowledge of God”, ch. 16 in *Twenty-four Discourses*, tr. in *The Philokalia*, Vol. 3, p.255.
- <sup>13</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, ch. 3, tr. Catherine Roth, Crestwood NY, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993, p.57.
- <sup>14</sup> John Chryssavgis, *Love, Sexuality and the Sacrament of Marriage*, Brookline MA, Holy Cross Press, 1996, p.2.
- <sup>15</sup> Mikro Euhologion, tr. Fr Evagoras Constantinides; publ. by the author, 1989, p.116.