

Sex

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Introduction

No discussion of theism—nor of religion or spirituality more generally—stands complete without some discussion of its relationship to lived experience. And no discussion of lived human experience stands complete without some consideration of embodied experience, of which sex (and sexuality) are a part. But theism and sex do not always fit together comfortably or relate to one another well. In many instances, especially when theism takes the shape of institutionalized religions, the relationship is fraught with mistrust and unease, misapprehensions and suspicions. The purpose of this essay is to trace some of the sources of that discomfort, to clarify the terms of dispute, and to analyze some recent strategies proposed to preserve theistic integrity while acknowledging contemporary sexual mores and practices.

Sex and Theism

An initial examination of the characteristics of theism does little to illustrate why the topic of sex should prove so often volatile and divisive. Theists minimally subscribe to a few broad and general tenets: belief in a personal deity who demands/deserves our respect and/or adoration, and who created the world from which that deity is both separate and engaged (Hawkins 1950). Engagement with the world distinguishes the

theistic God from a deistic God. The conviction that God is separate from the world (transcendence) distinguishes the theist from the (immanentist) pantheist. Neither of those notions entails any claims about sex.

Perhaps, then, the notion of God as person might prove more helpful in making sense of our concerns about sex. Typically, a theist understands God to be a personal being. But God is spirit rather than body, a spirit wholly good and wholly powerful as well as creator of the universe. And, as spirit, sexless. Thus God and humans are unlike in those respects.

A yet more fruitful line of inquiry might be into the connection between God and the world, a world that God created and yet from which God is so very different. An explanation of that connection entails philosophical inquiry into cosmology, natural theology, and metaphysics. A subset of that inquiry would be the determination of how belief in God relates to living one's life, requiring practical inquiry into ethics and politics. Those activities move us beyond individualized versions of theism to an immense historical tradition of theism institutionalized within organized religions. And it is there that we can find plenty of sex or, at least, discussions thereof.

Sex and Institutionalized Theism: Tensions, Ambivalence, Contradiction?

In the West, theism has most often appeared in institutional form as one of the three Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. And until recently in the West, Christianity has been the dominant expression of theism as both spiritual force and practical moral guide.

Not only is there no univocal position about sex and sexuality shared by the three Abrahamic traditions, there is not even a single stance within any one nor within the various denominations and sects and divisions of them. For almost every instance of the celebration of the human person—composite of body and soul—as a divine creation made in God’s image, one can find the expression of suspicions and fears about the “body” part of that person as well as a desire to control it and its sexual functions. Those expressions take different forms; some come from scripture, and some come from authorities whose work has been informed by philosophical as well as scriptural sources. We shall attempt in what follows to examine each to some extent, focusing primarily on the more manageable scriptural corpus.

From Scripture

It is easy and tempting—but unfair—simply to blame all of theism’s difficulties with sex on Platonic philosophy. Some blame probably does belong there. But some clearly pre-dates any Hellenistic influence upon Judaism. And some comes from the writings and the practices of the Jewish community long before Judaism knew much about Greek philosophy.

One does not find much direct commentary on sex and sexuality in the Hebrew Scriptures. There are few scriptural sources for sexual ethics in either the Hebrew or the Greek Scriptures. One can, however, detect an ambivalence towards the body and towards sex. On the one hand, the body and its capacities are the products of a good and loving creator; therefore, they must be good. On the other hand, fallen humanity is self-

centered and anti-social, and capable of using the body in ways that cause harm to self and others. And fallen humanity, remembering its Edenic origins, experiences shame and regret. That shame is often attached to bodily and specifically sexual functions.

The Hebrew Scriptures begin with creation accounts in the Book of Genesis. There, already, we can feel the tensions that come to characterize religious understandings of the body:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . .” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply.” (Genesis 1.26–8)

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” (Genesis 2.18)

Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2.24–5)

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves. (Genesis 3.6–7)

Biblical scholars offer multiple readings of these passages. It is not our intention here to engage in discussions best left to those scholars, but rather simply to point to apparently contradictory views of nakedness (and, thus, the body) before and after the fall. Before the fall, the naked body was perfectly acceptable. After the fall, it needs to be covered. Did sin make the body, and thus by extension sex, bad?

Augustine will later read Genesis as a story about the disorder brought to the soul as an effect of sin, and consequently to the destruction of human relationships. We shall turn to that reading in the next section. For now, however, it suffices to suggest that the original sin that affected all of humanity following Eve's and Adam's eating of the forbidden fruit transformed the human person, a created good, into something flawed and thus not quite so good any more.

One possible reading of the remainder of the Hebrew Scriptures, and indeed one understanding of the Jewish tradition more generally, is that the history of the world is in fact a history of the covenant between God and (human) creation. Many of the practices and rituals of Judaism, understood in this light, attempt to make God's presence available to the community. Some of those rituals might be understood as a way to purify that which has been sullied by sin. One can certainly read the book of Leviticus that way. It begins with instructions about sacrificial offerings (chapters 1–3) and then moves to penitential offerings for sins committed (chapters 4–5). These sacrifices return the sinner to a right relationship with God. In that context, later chapters (6–11) define “clean” and “unclean” food sources and provide the foundation for Jewish dietary restrictions.

Beginning with chapter 12, “clean” and “unclean” are applied to humans:

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean.... Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks.... (Leviticus 12.2–6)

Chapters 13 and 14 provide advice for restoring lepers, chapter 15 for men who have had “discharges” from their flesh. Chapter 18 begins with an admonition:

You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes. My ordinances you shall observe and my statutes you shall keep, following them. I am the Lord our God. You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances; by doing so one shall live. I am the Lord. (Leviticus 18.2–5)

That chapter next prohibits approaching anyone to uncover nakedness (18.6–18) and then lists what have come to be other standard forbidden practices:

You shall not approach a woman to uncover her nakedness while she is in her menstrual uncleanness. You shall not have sexual relations with your kinsman’s wife, and defile yourself with her. You shall not give any of your offspring to sacrifice them to Moloch, and so profane the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. You shall not

have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it: it is perversion.

(Leviticus 18.19–24)

Two phrases recur throughout Leviticus: “You shall keep my statutes and my ordinances” and “I am the Lord your God.” Leviticus is full of instructions designed to ensure, recover, and/or maintain the order of the community and, thereby, a right relationship with God. But what is especially noteworthy is the designation of “clean” and “unclean” as related to bodily functions. Male functions can be unclean, specifically those called “discharges.” Those discharges, while not specified, appear irregular and not ordinary. Leprosy, a disease, renders one unclean. But wholly natural female functions, i.e. menstruation and childbirth, are also unclean. These are not diseases; they occur regularly and are not extraordinary. They are functions of a normal and female body. And so what appears to be happening in Leviticus is not simply a listing of ritual practices and prohibitions but an inscription of a gender hierarchy according to which female bodies are polluted (unclean) in a way in which male bodies are not. And so ritual reinforces a social structure that, by the time of Moses, had become intensely patriarchal. In fact, one might even suggest that the prohibition against homosexuality, which is later deemed “unnatural” because of its failure to produce offspring, is initially problematic because it reduces one of the male bodies to the (socially inferior) position of the female. That would also then explain why Lot, in the Sodom and Gomorrah story of Genesis 19, offers his young virgin daughters to the crowd in place of the male visitors whom they intended

to rape. Rape of Lot's daughters, on this reading, is acceptable while (homosexual) rape of visitors to whom one has extended hospitality is not.

The Hebrew Scriptures, however, do not restrict themselves to legalistic prescriptions and proscriptions. Contrast the book of Leviticus, early in the Torah, with one of the later "Writings," the Song of Songs sometimes called the Song of Solomon. That is not one of the priestly books, and it is clearly not an instruction manual prescribing rituals to preserve the community. Nor is it like any other biblical literature. It does not have a clear plot; it is more like a drama or a collection of poems. And it speaks of highly erotic human love, love conjoined with sex:

Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is better than wine,
your anointing oils are fragrant. (1.2–3)

Ah, you are beautiful, my love; ah, you are beautiful; your eyes are doves.... Our
couch is green; the beams of our house are cedar, our rafters are pine. (1.15–17)

My beloved is mine and I am his; he pastures his flock among the lilies. (2.16–17)

Upon my bed at night I sought him who my soul loves. (3.1)

Let my beloved come to his garden and eat its choicest fruits. (4.16)

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as
death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for
love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned. (8.6–7)

Scholars have speculated that these poems resemble, structurally, Egyptian love songs and Syrian wedding songs (Bandstra 1995: 449). Others have noted that God is not mentioned anywhere in the text. Song of Songs has been used by Jews and Christians alike to argue that human sexual love is the model of the covenant between God and the people of Israel or between Christ and the Church. Perhaps so. But, as Bandstra points out:

The inclusion of the Song of Songs within the canon is at some level an affirmation of the essential created goodness of sex. Certainly through the history of the formation of the canon this posed problems. Perhaps the rabbinic and early Christian allegorizing was really just a rationalization for including this erotic poetry in the canon. They knew all along the goodness of human love and realized the importance of canonically affirming it. (Bandstra 1995:449–50)

The Jewish tradition sees sex as a good because of its creation by God. It is a good that is subject to regulation and laws and social needs. Structured within marriage, it can be a participation in the covenantal relationship between God and his people. Its purpose is procreation, i.e. “Be fruitful and multiply.” On the other hand, pleasure rather than procreation is the message of the Song of Songs. One might read that latter text as anomalous, then, in more than just the ways cited above. It is also about individuals engaged in a relationship that does not necessarily have any communal repercussions. Leviticus and Songs are two interesting texts whose complementarity is not readily evident and whose apparently contradictory messages speak to the reader: The body is

good, as it is created by a good God. The body is a source of pleasure. The activities of the body have a social dimension to them, as bodies live together in community.

Communal life requires regulation and control of those bodies so as to ensure social stability. Therefore, not all pleasures are acceptable, nor are all bodily activities. Cherish the body. But control the body. And only act in those ways prescribed by God through the tradition.

The Greek Scriptures are even more meager in addressing sex and sexuality. In Matthew 19 Jesus describes marriage as ordained by God and decrees divorce unacceptable:

Some Pharisees came to him, and to test him they asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning ‘made them male and female,’ and said ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.” (Matthew 19.3–7)

Furthermore,

He said to them, “It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery.” (Matthew 19.8–9)

Thus, marriage is a good, designed by God and protected by the law. But in that same book, celibacy also appears for the first time as a good. Jesus asks his followers to leave their families and reject the norms of ordinary (married) Jewish life:

Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.” (Matthew 8.21–2 and Luke 9.59–60)

Then Peter said, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.” And he said to them, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.” (Luke 9.28–30)

And, finally, in a continuation of the marriage/divorce/adultery theme from Matthew 19:

His disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry.” But he said to them, “Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.” (Matthew 10–12)

Jesus would have been familiar with the Essenes, a radical group of Jews who lived in community in the desert and who practiced asceticism and celibacy. They became known upon the discovery of the *Dead Sea Scrolls*, which contain a version of the Hebrew Bible, a manual of discipline for the community, and “war scrolls” (Ariel 2007). That community preached an apocalyptic vision of the end days. They represent a departure from the norm of Jewish life and practice. Celibacy will come to dominate the later Christian imagination far more than the Jewish one. Jesus never married, and he called his followers to leave their families even if they were married. But there appears little besides Jesus’ command to justify the celibacy he advocates for his followers. It might reasonably be argued that celibacy allowed its practitioners freedom from obligations that would tie them down and prevent them from a life of preaching and service. On the other hand, later in the Christian tradition, celibacy will be understood as the more perfect way, based upon a reading of the body as corrupt or corruptible. The Greek Scriptures contain no indication of that understanding.

Ironically, of course, if Jesus was the son of God, divine himself, then his embodiment—his incarnation—should serve as a positive reinforcement of the notion that the body is good. But his incarnation was, first of all, as a male body. And, secondly, from all evidence Jesus never married. That, again, leaves us with some mixed messages about the fundamental goodness of the body (i.e. whose body?) and an ambivalence about sex.

Scholars often cite as the central message of Jesus, and, by extension, of Christianity, the idea of love. The ethical sensibility that one can derive from the Greek Scriptures in places like Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount (chapter 5) is always a social

sensibility, one concerned with living peacefully together in society and loving even one's enemies. But any development of a sexual ethics based upon that particular articulation of love will have to account for such harsh sayings as "everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5.28) and "anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Matthew 5.32).

Perhaps it is too much to expect consistency from a scriptural tradition that spans two millennia and consists of contributions from various disparate groups of people. Perhaps, too, it is too much to expect systematization from loose and youthful institutions just beginning to formalize themselves. Perhaps, then, we should look to the subsequent development of those institutions.

From Authority and Tradition

To attempt to provide for authority and tradition the detail of scholarship just completed above would prove to be a daunting task indeed. Fortunately, it has been done, at least through the time of Augustine, in Peter Brown's monumental (nearly 500 page) *The Body in Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988). His is the first in the list of recommended readings at the end of this chapter. We shall instead here just highlight some major themes and consider Paul, Augustine, and Aquinas.

The development of the institution of Christianity happened on a number of fronts during the first century of the Common Era. Most important of the early disciples was

Paul (5–60 C.E.), formerly Saul of Tarsus, a convert from Judaism who spoke Greek and was a Roman citizen. He traveled widely and visited any number of Greek cities. He never knew Jesus but preached his gospel to the “gentiles,” the pagans who lived in those Greek cities. He wrote letters to their inhabitants, letters of direction which often mention “the flesh.”

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. (Romans 7.19) So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7.25) To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (Romans 8.6)

And, famously, from 1 Corinthians 7:8–9: “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am. But if they are not practicing self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.”

These brief quotations provide enough to generate centuries, even millennia, of suspicions about sex and about the body. For it is in Paul that we first clearly see the dichotomy of flesh and spirit, as clearly as it appears in Platonic philosophy. Here too we see that the spirit is required to control its unruly body. And, finally, marriage is a remedy for weakness and lack of self-control. This disciplinary approach is new in the history of infant Christianity. Marriage, while clearly an expression of patriarchy and the dominant male in Judaism, was still held to be an indisputable good. Marriage was about a way of life and social practices. Here, in Paul, sex and marriage are about individuals and sin; the individual Christian needs a rational soul to dominate his/her unruly body.

Many recent arguments have been made to suggest that our historical reading of Paul has been inaccurate. (See, among others, Jordan 2002 below.) Be that as it may, it has been a reading that has informed the history of Christianity from the first century onwards. And it signals a shift in Christianity to a negative view of sex and marriage that veers sharply away from the early, albeit ambivalent, Jewish understanding. From that view one can trace a line that leads ultimately to Puritanism and the Shakers.

Paul's execution by the Romans on or around the year 60 C.E. did not stop the spread of the new religion. However, his spirit/body dichotomy and his disavowal of the flesh did not immediately catch on with Romans. Virginité for women was fine; the vestal virgins, after all, had a social place. But to expand that virginité to men was more problematic. And so the clergy remained married through the time of Ambrose and Jerome and Augustine. Peter Brown's work can serve as a useful guide for understanding the works of the former two, in particular how their theological understandings slowly shifted to a position that validated sexual differences, sexual hierarchy, and male domination, and ended a period of "intimacy with devout women as colleagues, disciples, and mentors" (Brown 1988: 382).

With Augustine (354–430 C.E.), that was never a worry. Augustine treasured his male friends more than the concubine with whom he shared a son and thirteen years of faithful intimacy. Augustine's sexual profligacy has probably reached the category of urban legend. His "autobiography" exaggerates for dramatic effect; he was, after all, a rhetorician. He is often read as someone who sowed his oats throughout his youth and then, after his conversion, wanted no one else to share in the fun. He was undoubtedly raised in a neo-Platonic tradition that made him suspicious of the body and wary of

desire. His understanding of sin as disorder and disruption make him the perfect candidate for appropriation by some of those primarily Protestant faith traditions that disparage the flesh. At times he sounds a lot like Paul. “Who, what sort, am I – what if not evil, in what I do, or (if not in what I do) in what I say, or (if not in what I say) in what I want” *Confessions* 9.I.1 (Augustine 2006 [397]: 185). But for Augustine evil was a Platonic absence, absence of right order, absence of focus, absence of loving what one ought to love and, instead, loving either the wrong things or the right things too much or not enough.

Augustine’s *Confessions* trace his journey to maturity through careful introspection. He admits to being “without love to this point. I was in love with loving. Unaware of my own needs, I resisted what would make me less needy. I wanted something to love, since I was in love with loving...” *Confessions* 3.I.1 (Augustine 2006 [397]: 41). He understands that everything is about love but cannot figure out where to find it. And he understands, as confessed in book eight, that both the cause and the result of sin is a flawed will. His discussion of the theft of the pears in *Confessions* 2, so obviously paralleling his discussion of Adam’s sin in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, leads Brown to conclude that, for Augustine, the problem with sex is not so much tied to the body as to the will. Augustine believed that sex and friendship were conjoined in the relationship of Adam and Eve in Eden. Adam’s sin was to choose friendship with Eve over God’s command, just as Augustine’s was to choose to steal with his friends rather than to do what was right. As a consequence, sexual intercourse after the fall became severed from the tenderness and friendship that had characterized it beforehand. (Brown 1988: 402) The solution for Augustine is not virginity or sexual renunciation as a

purification of the evils of the body. The solution, instead, should be the realignment of soul and body into their natural and happy original relationship, much like the happy original relationship of Adam and Eve. It is not sex that is bad for us; it is our disordered will that seeks the wrong things in the wrong proportions and in the wrong ways.

Both Brown and Wills present a reading of Augustine that is far less negative than the one which has survived through the tradition and through subsequent appropriations. Augustine obviously and certainly sees humans as suffering from a flawed and sinful nature. But that nature is more a result of acts of will than of acts of the body. And, when the sinner is engaged in sexual excess, his/her failure is not due to the body but to a refusal to choose right order.

No discussion of authority and tradition is complete without including Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), the systematic philosopher and theologian who put together, in his *Summa Theologiae*, the most thorough-going compilation of insights into God, humans, and the world. But he speaks very little about sex. What he develops that is relevant to our purposes is the concept of natural law, which becomes the foundation for determination of the morality of sexual (and other) actions. The concept of natural law can be traced to both the Stoics and Aristotle. In question 90, article 1, of his *Summa Theologiae* I–II, Aquinas argues that law is something pertaining to reason. And reason, i.e. philosophical reflection, will serve to ground all of Aquinas' comments about law. In article 2, following Aristotle, Aquinas argues that law is always directed to a good and the good, for humans, is happiness. Aquinas' work, like Aristotle's, is profoundly teleological. All of reality is structured by finality and purpose. Within that context, law is a "dictate of practical reason coming from the person who has charge of a perfect

community” (Question 91, article 1). Natural law is the participation in the eternal law, i.e. the providential governance and order of the universe. “The first principle of practical reason – the primary precept of the law – can be formulated in the following manner: ‘Good is to be done and pursued and evil is to be avoided.’ All the rest of the precepts of the natural law are based upon this principle” (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, Question 94, article 2). Reason is our guide in the determination of action. As in Book V of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aquinas contends that all things have a specific nature, and goodness comes from acting in accordance with that nature.

It is not difficult to see, then, how Aquinas’ work becomes relevant to questions about marriage, family, and sex. Sex is directed towards procreation. Marriage and the family are the venue where that occurs. Aquinas considers the family in Book III of his *Summa Contra Gentiles*. From Chapter 123, section 1: “not only that the society of man and woman of the human species, which we call matrimony, should be long lasting, but even that it should endure throughout an entire life.” From section 3: “For the female needs the male, not merely for the sake of generation...but also for the sake of government, since the male is both more perfect in reasoning, and stronger in his powers.” Again, shades of Aristotle. And, from sections 5 and 6: “It is contrary to the natural instinct of the human species for a wife to be separated from her husband.... Furthermore, the greater that friendship is, the more solid and lasting it will be.” Aquinas continues in this section to consider procreation as the “natural end” of marriage aimed at the good of the preservation of the species.

And so the tradition uses Aquinas to confirm/affirm beliefs about marriage as being between one man and one woman for the purpose of procreation and for the rest of

their life. One can see how this philosophical formulation can be used to justify prohibitions against artificial contraception (because denying the natural end of the act of intercourse, procreation) and homosexuality (because those acts cannot result in the natural end of procreation and thus become “unnatural”).

Strategies to Rehabilitate the Traditions

The sexual revolution that has captured our imagination since at least the 1960s and probably, more accurately, since the cultural depression of the 1920s following World War I, has left traditional institutionalized religions in a quandary. More and more they try to maintain their role as viable moral guides. But, if Michel Foucault (1978) is right, their role as disciplinary enforcer has been lost to the state over the course of the past few hundred years. In addition they witnessed, during the past century, a decline in church attendance in the West, a loss of membership to more fundamentalist sects, and a widespread ignoring of their sexual prescriptions and proscriptions. These phenomena have generated a series of responses ranging from holding the line to rewriting the tradition. In this final section we shall engage in a brief review of a few of these strategies and suggest lines of inquiry for interested readers to pursue.

In the Catholic Christian tradition, attempts have been made to rehabilitate Thomas Aquinas for a modern age. Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris* (1879) that declared Aquinas the official philosopher of Catholicism resulted in a revived interest in his work and its applicability. From the years 1920–1940 alone, 5666 entries appeared in a Thomistic bibliography published as a supplement to volume XXI of *Modern Schoolman*

(Bourke 1945). From the 1930s onward, Catholic philosophers and theologians attempted to rehabilitate Aquinas by turning to what has been called Transcendental Thomism, or to an Existentialist Thomism or, finally, to personalism. The latter position was espoused by Karol Wojtyla, Pope John-Paul II, himself the product of an education in continental philosophy and phenomenology. But even more traditional versions of Thomism continue to survive. In the 1960s, as the Church geared up to reconsider its position on artificial contraception, two Roman Catholic philosophers—Germain Grisez and Louis Dupré—each teaching in the philosophy department at Georgetown University, found themselves on opposite sides of the debate. Grisez (1964) used natural law to support the ban on artificial contraception by maintaining procreation as a primary purpose of sex. Dupré (1964) used natural law to advocate for a change in the traditional position, arguing that it is our nature to use our reason to devise ways to control the physical world. Dupré may well have convinced the pontifical commission that recommended a change in the Church's position, but Paul VI decided to overturn that recommendation.

More recently, Gareth Moore, O.P. (2001 [1992]), a Dominican in the tradition of Aquinas, has addressed sexual ethics from the perspective of the primacy of the concept of love of neighbor. He argues to preserve most of the Catholic Christian teachings on sex, but from a different vantage point, from that of love. He provides a sophisticated account of motive and action, and he continues the Thomistic tradition of using natural reason as the basis from which to argue. He also calls our attention to the necessity for careful, scholarly work in biblical translation and contextualization. He exhorts us to attend to the social structure from which various prohibitions arise. For example, he revisits Leviticus' account of the prohibition against homosexuality between men and

reminds the reader that no such prohibition of sex between women can be found there. “The understanding of this law that sees it as forbidding homosexual relations, just like that, is oversimple and misses the point...it forbids a man lying with a man *as with a woman*” (Moore 2001 [1992]: 39). It is forbidden because it reduces one man to the position of a woman, and that violates the social order of the ancient Israelites. His point is not that homosexuality is now acceptable when once it was not. It is, rather, that one needs to investigate the sources of prohibitions and determine the reason for them.

In the Protestant Christian tradition James B. Nelson (1992) of the United Church of Christ blames the body/spirit dualism of the earlier Christian tradition for the distortion of sex that one so often finds. He advocates a continuation of the sexual revolution of the 1960s to get rid of our root problems, “the continuing power of our inherited sexual dualisms – spirit believed to be essentially different from and superior to body – and its patriarchal counterpart, male believed to be essentially different from and superior to female” (Nelson 1992: 19). His solution is to engage in dialogue with others using scripture, tradition, experience, and reason to address and reevaluate issues such as sexual orientation, marriage, pornography, sexual abuse, and sexual violence. He is motivated by what he thinks is an urgent need to address “discrepancies between official Church teaching and the actual sexual practices of Church members” (Nelson 1992: 18).

One final strategy to commend to our readers’ consideration is one undertaken by a host of scholars. It consists of a careful rereading and reconsideration of both scripture and tradition, beginning with the study of ancient languages and focusing on insights available from anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians to obtain accurate versions of ancient (and not so ancient) texts. Some of this work of pain-staking and meticulous

scholarship is present in, for example, Garry Wills' recent translation of Augustine's *Confessions* (2006 [397]). More can be seen in Mark D. Jordan's *The Ethics of Sex* (2002) wherein he returns to the translation of Paul's term *porneia* (1 Thessalonians 4) and carefully considers that in other Greek texts, prior to a long tradition of emphasis on "lust" and "fornication," the word referred to "prostitution." Such vigilant scholarship can clarify historical interpretations and suggest alternative readings that might make more sense of the sex/theism relationship. And perhaps even address the genuine suffering of real people resulting from applications of hasty or uninformed interpretations.

Jordan's other suggestion is one that seems an appropriate note on which to end this chapter. He suggests that the Church should consider attending to sexual politics as much as to sexual ethics. He contends, in the spirit of Foucault, that we need to reconceptualize the Christian project as the search for sin

in the exercises of codifying power. These days the most dangerous sins don't seem to come from the pursuit of sexual pleasure, but from the pursuit of power.... The parable (after Foucault) encourages us to conceive the possibility for rethinking Christian ethics apart from any of the old projects of Christendom or the current project of tacit accommodation to modern state power. If we were able to free Christian ethics somewhat from the visible and invisible needs of regulatory programs, we might conceive the glorious possibility of a Christian sexual ethics that would not be the ethics of any Christendom. After centuries in which Christian ethics has been enforced as a police power, we might rather be

grateful for the innocence relative powerlessness affords our discourses. We could stop trying to strike a quiet deal with the successors of Christendom; we could enjoy our dispossession. We might even begin to think of Christian sexual ethics as the salvific teaching of God through the sexual lives of Christians. (Jordan 2002: 137–8)

Related Topics

Chapter 3: The God of the Jews and the Jewish God; Chapter 4: Christianity; Chapter 23: Psychology; Chapter 25: Moral Inquiry.

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