

The Sexual Relationship in Christian Thought

By

Philip Sherrard

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 5, No. 3. (Summer, 1971) © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

THE idea of the sacramental potentiality of sexual love is one of the most creative and ennobling ideas in which the European imagination has shared. Anticipated by Plato and by some of the neo-Platonic philosophers, particularly Plotinus, it began gradually to be affirmed in the Middle Ages: in the legends surrounding the Holy Grail, in that *ley de cortezia* of the Provençal palaces which marks the first break with the ascetic spirit of the mediaeval world; in the love of Tristan and Iseult and later in that of Dante and Beatrice, as well as in the works of Renaissance figures like Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. Subsequently it is celebrated by several of the English poets—by Shakespeare, Spencer, Blake, Emily Brontë and Yeats, to mention but a few of them—and attempts are made to give it a philosophical or religious basis by writers like Soloviev and Berdiaev. One of its more recent literary expressions is in Pasternak's *Dr. Zhivago*.

What are the implications of this discovery? When we speak of sexual love, we cover by that term a whole host of meanings, moods and activities. It denotes anything ranging from desire for the body of another person to the passion of an Othello or a Don Juan. Most confusing of all, we speak of "making love" when what we mean is another function altogether. In fact, most of our references to sex or sexual love are colored by associations with purely physical or what is called carnal activity. Hence it is necessary to discriminate and to say that this sacramental form of sexual love is something different from the love (if it can be called that) which is simply sensual desire or passion. It is something different even from that mutual sympathy, fidelity and affection which by and large stands as the Christian ideal of marriage. What is indicated in this form of love is a relationship between two people—a man and a woman—in which each through their mutual awareness and recognition of each other experience what Plato calls that "something, they do not know what" which overflows their beings and transforms their individual existence into a single reality. Through it, an "I—thou" totality in the way that Martin Buber understood it is established; or a single heart and a single soul in two bodies:

So they loved, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one;
Two distincts, division none:
Number there in love was slain.

It is a mutual awareness and recognition which is a total act of the soul. We tend to distinguish between the love of God and the love of one person for another—to distinguish between *Agape* and *Eros*—and to regard the second as a rather debased form of the first, if not as directly opposed to the first and only indulged at the expense of the first. In a sexualized sacramental love there is no such distinction. It is transcended and eliminated and there is but a single communion, a single participation of the man and the woman and the divine in each other, although it must be remembered that however transparent the two human beings become to

each other in its light, the divine itself always remains hidden and inaccessible in its essence. It is because of its participation in the divine that this love may further be defined as Plato defines it, namely, as a birth in beauty (*tiktein en to kalo*); and for the same reason it may also be said to partake potentially of eternity.

It may therefore be concluded that this sacramental form of sexual love is not simply a human emotion or impulse or even a created cosmic or elemental force. Still less is it to be identified simply with a bodily or a somato-psychic energy. It is, in its origins, a spiritual energy. It is rooted in divine life itself and its principle, so to say, is placed by God in man and woman in their creation. Hence, to be united in this love is to find oneself returned to oneself, to one's full being and primal condition. In this sense, it is not simply to be born in beauty. It is also to be regenerated in God and to have the divine Paradise revealed to one. In other words, it is a form of sexual relationship which has a spiritualizing influence on the two people concerned in it. It follows from this that its *raison d'être* is not the generation of children or any other specifiable purpose connected with the family or the race or which is, as it were, external to itself. It also follows that though it is a fully sexualized love, in that it involves the fully differentiated beings of man and woman, this sexual element need not have any so-called carnal (or genital) expression: not because the man and the woman have taken any vow of virginity or regard celibacy as a superior state of existence, but simply because the kind of communion they experience makes such expression unnecessary—a descent into a lower key. Finally, it must be said that this form of love is relatively a rare occurrence: rare, because it demands a high level of understanding and sensitivity, and because it also demands the fulfillment of certain conditions which are not always present or which people are not always willing to fulfill unreservedly.

The idea of the sexual relationship as a sacrament is of course affirmed by the Christian Church. It is the corner-stone of the Christian conception of marriage. It is understood that Christ's presence at the marriage in Cana and the fact that it was there that He performed His first miracle implies that God not only approves of marriage but also gives it His special blessing. Therefore the Church continues to give it her special blessing. If it is asked why such a dignity has been conferred on marriage, the answer generally given is that there are two main reasons to account for it. The first is that it unites man and woman and that this union has a sacred significance. Here the traditional authority is St. Paul. In the Epistle to the Ephesians (5: 31-32), it is indicated that in marriage man and woman become one flesh and that this great mystery corresponds to the relationship between Christ and the Church. Marriage—the union of man and woman—symbolizes the union of Christ and the Church and so is sacred. The second main reason for regarding marriage as sacred is that it is the established institution for the procreation of children. God said to our forefathers: "Be fruitful and multiply"; and this is taken to mean that He wanted Adam and Eve to have children and must therefore regard the procreation of children by husband and wife as a holy procedure under all circumstances. It follows that marriage, through which man and woman become husband and wife, must also be holy, provided the Church gives it her blessing.

Yet in spite of the fact that marriage is recognized as a sacrament by the Church, the attitude of Christian thought towards the sexual relationship and its spiritualizing potentialities has in practice been singularly limited and negative. From the start Christian authors have been ill at ease with the whole subject. First, supported by a literal interpretation of Christ's words about those who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven, as well as by St. Paul's commendation of the single state (1 Cor. VII), early Christian theologians did not hesitate to affirm that celibacy is *per se* superior to marriage; and, second, they have seemed incapable of envisaging any aspect of sexuality other than its purely generative (not to say genital) expression,

and towards this they display an antipathy obsessive to a degree scarcely less than vicious. Although precluded by their basic doctrine from subscribing to an out-and-out dualism in this matter, and so from attributing the origin of sexuality directly to an evil power, their practical attitude differs little from that of dualists of a Manichaean type. Sexuality is tainted. It is impure. It invests matrimony (which in any case must be regarded as a concession to those too feeble to endure the single state) with shame and contaminates those who indulge in it. If not actually evil in itself, its use stirs up the passions and so leads directly to sin. It is the springhead through which the tribes of evil pour into human nature. Consequently any progress in the life of the spirit demands as an initial step the circumventing or transcending of sexuality. Not until that step is taken is man capable of entering into a truly spiritual state.

In spite of differences in a number of doctrinal presuppositions, both the eastern and the western Christian traditions manifest a very similar attitude to the sexual relationship and its significance. Where the eastern tradition is concerned, two authors—St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Maximos the Confessor—may be taken as representative. For both, their attitude to the sexual life derives from their anthropology—their idea of what precisely it is that constitutes human nature. The foundation of this anthropology is the text in Genesis (1.26): "Let us make man in our image and resemblance". What man is "in the image" is his natural state and provides the norm for human life. In his original state—as he is created "in the image"—man comprehends what we call the intellectual life (the *nous*) and the spiritual life (the *pneuma*); and it is these two realities together which constitutes the true and basic man. The animal or organic life has as it were been superadded to this true and basic man. It is superadded as a consequence of the "fall". This is indicated in another text in Genesis (3.21): "The Lord God made Adam and his wife garments of skin". These "garments of skin" (chitones) are the figure of the animal life. They are identified as accretions and alien to man's basic nature, superimposed upon this nature as a consequence of its declension from its original state. The condition into which man is born in this world is not his natural condition. It is an unnatural and fallen condition; and he has to find his way back to the natural un-fallen life for which he was created "in the image".

Two fundamental qualities distinguish this natural un-fallen life: immortality and incorruptibility; and, St. Gregory argues, the presence of these two qualities presupposes the absence of sexuality. In his original state as he is created "in the image", man is free from sexuality. There is not even a division between the sexes. There is no man and woman. Sexuality is one of the consequences of a fall and of the loss of immortality and incorruptibility that goes with it. It is a consequence of man's investiture with an animal or organic life. It is one of the most disastrous consequences of the fall because it is the source of the passions, and it is the passions which lead to sin. "I consider it to be from this principle (the sexual life) that the passions as from a fountain-head flow over human nature", writes St. Gregory; while for St. Maximos the fall itself is due precisely to bodily desire and a search for sensual pleasure, and this is confirmed most fully in the sexual relationship. Hence the importance of virginity. Virginity is a condition of man's return to his original state. A true Christian, St. Gregory maintains, must choose between two forms of marriage, one "bodily" and the other "spiritual". His choice can be for one of these forms only, since they are mutually exclusive. In fact, man is called upon to choose the second form—spiritual marriage—in which he does not desire an earthly woman, but true Wisdom, and in which the soul is attached to the incorruptible Bridegroom and her love (*eros*) is related to the true Wisdom which is God.

Sexual love between man and woman is, therefore, at the expense of the spiritual life. Sexual relationships, as such, are the consequence of sin and are only to be tolerated because they provide for the continuity of the human race. Even the distinction between man and woman only

exists or is only established because God foresees that man is going to sin and so to fall and therefore will be in need of a mode of propagation which will make it possible for him to continue the human race under new conditions. But the Pauline phrase (Galatians III:28) is adduced to confirm that in Christ there is "neither male nor female" (the alternative Pauline phrase (I Cor. XI.11) to the effect that "neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord", tends to be ignored); and the scriptural passage (Matthew XXII:30) in which Christ tells the Sadducees that in the resurrection people neither marry nor are married is taken to signify that man should live without marriage. This does not mean that the value of marriage is totally denied. It cannot be totally denied because without it man cannot be born into this world. But, according to St. Maximos, at best it constitutes only the lowest and most external of the unions which man must experience before he can be restored to the spiritual state. Even so, a generic sin is always at work within the sexual relationship and this can only be extirpated on condition that sexuality itself is extirpated. One has to transcend the sexual life and even to overcome the sexual differentiation altogether in order to dry up the passions at their source, because until the passions are dried up one cannot begin to live the life of the spirit. Only through monastic celibacy can man recover that natural—and sexless—state for which he was originally created "in the image".

Where the western Christian tradition is concerned the scene is dominated by the imposing figure of St. Augustine, whose theology of marriage was to set the over-all pattern for western Christian thinking in these matters for the next fifteen hundred years and continues to be influential even today.¹ This theology—as western Christian theology in general—presupposes an anthropology different from that of the Greek Patristic tradition. In western theology, man by nature—as he is created "in the image"—is a union of the animal or organic life and the intellectual life. The animal or organic life is not superadded to man as a consequence of the fall. On the contrary, it is the spiritual life which is superadded to man's natural state. Man is not spiritual by nature, as he is in the eastern Christian tradition. He is spiritual through a supererogatory act of grace. This difference modifies the perspective within which St. Augustine writes. But in common with theologians of both traditions, he too is almost exclusively concerned with the purely genital aspect of sexuality and is acutely embarrassed by the fact that in this world the good work of generation cannot take place without "a certain amount of bestial movement" and "a violent acting of lust". Indeed, that the genitals are no longer under control is for St. Augustine one of the most evident consequences of the "fall" of man. In Paradise no such bestial movement accompanied the act of generation; and had such an act occurred in Paradise it would have been accomplished without any emotional disturbance. But when pride and self-will provoked Adam and Eve to sin, a new and destructive impulse asserted itself within them; and this impulse—an insatiable search for self-satisfaction which St. Augustine calls concupiscence, or lust—although it manifested itself in all spheres of life, was most evident in the disobedience of the genitals, which now lost their passivity and refused to submit to the will. It is because of this that the genitals had to be covered—they were now *pudenda* and objects of shame. And they have continued to be *pudenda* and objects of shame, the outward sign of human degradation and evil.

The identifying of sexuality with its purely genital expression and its close association with evil is one of the aspects of Augustinian theology which has been most pervasive in western Christian thought; and it is linked both by St. Augustine himself and by later writers with their particular conception of original sin. Western theologians have always insisted on the idea that all human beings have sinned "in Adam": all are guilty of original sin, all bear the responsibility for it and all must suffer the punishment that God has inflicted on man because of it. Each human

being has in some sense committed the original crime of rebellion; and although this crime is not itself identified with sexual activity, its consequences are most immediately and most dramatically evident in the sexual sphere. There is a direct and intimate link between original sin and concupiscence, and the effects of concupiscence are most powerful in the uncontrollable movement of the genitals. Hence every act of coition performed by man is not only inextricably related to the original sin for which each human being is responsible; it also shares in the taint of that sin and binds man more firmly to it. Moreover, it is by means of this sexual activity that evil is transmitted from generation to generation: every child conceived can be said literally to have been conceived in the sin of its parents, and because of this every child bears within it the seeds of evil from the very moment of its conception. It too is ineradicably involved not merely in the consequences of Adam's crime, but in that crime itself, and must bear the punishment for it. Nothing, not even marriage, can take away the stigma attached to every act of generation performed by fallen man. Marriage itself is good; but as the carnal acts for which it provides an opportunity and which in a certain measure it sanctions cannot be performed without the bestial movement of fleshly lust, these acts must remain sinful and shameful even within marriage. Marriage cannot remove their intrinsic evil. All it can do—and here St. Augustine promotes a tortuosity that has become embedded in Christian thought in this connection—is to make it possible for those who engage in the act of coition to engage in it not to satisfy their lust but as a distasteful duty unavoidable in the begetting of children. So long as married men and women perform such an act solely for the purpose of generation, they may be excused the sin they commit; although they are not on this account any less responsible for passing this sin on to their intended offspring. To copulate for any motive other than procreation, or with any intention of frustrating procreation, is simply abominable debauchery, and cancels that exemption from venial sin which is accorded to married couples who perform the shameful deed because they cannot encompass the good work of begetting children in any other manner.

By such argument, then, St. Augustine and his theological successors (who include practically every mediaeval theologian in the western Christian tradition) separated the idea of marriage from that of the sexual relationship and set the first over against the second so radically that only through contortions of the most devious kind have those who have accepted their views been able to reconcile the demands of the one with the prescriptions surrounding the other. Indeed, as these views did in fact become the guiding principles for those most responsible for the moral conduct of the Christian community—the officers of the Church—it is hardly surprising that the modern heirs of this community should suffer from an in-built schizophrenia in all that concerns this most intimate and personal aspect of their lives. Moreover, the split in consciousness and in behavior that is an inevitable result of driving a wedge not so much between body and soul as between the idea of marriage, which theologians were constrained to regard as good, and the fact of the sexual relationship, in which they tended to see the consequence and even the actualization of original sin, became still more extreme once marriage itself was viewed as possessing a sacramental character. Indeed, the situation then became altogether absurd.

St. Paul had not only invested marriage with a symbolism of a most sacred order. He had also made it clear (I Cor. VI: 16) that for man and woman to become one flesh and so to conform to the symbolism of the union of Christ and the Church they had to fulfill the act of coition. When this symbolism was regarded as conferring on marriage a sacramental dignity—and St. Augustine himself believed this to be the case—the fact that marriage could acquire this dignity and so its indissolubility only through such a consummation continued to be accepted virtually without question. This placed Christian theologians in an untenable position. They were obliged by scriptural authority to accept that the procreation of children was an end good in itself and that

by becoming one flesh man and woman partook of a "great mystery" and possessed the sign of a supernatural union; yet they were persuaded that the act which determined both procreation and this *sacramentum* is tainted with evil. They had to conclude that the act of coition is necessary to marriage so long as its motive is to produce children; but even this motive did not in their eyes exonerate the act itself from impurity and shame. Such an attitude not only involved them in the absurdity of attributing to God the willing of something—the procreation of children—which could be achieved only through means that contributed to human degradation; it also compelled them to pretend that the main motive for sexual intercourse between man and woman must be the wish to produce offspring. By embracing the fiction that the main motive for such intercourse both should and could in practice be reduced to one of wishing to procreate, these authors committed Christian thought in this matter to a tangle of hypocrisy from which it has not yet disentangled itself.

Caught in this confusion, later mediaeval theologians gradually displaced the idea of the union of man and woman in one flesh from the central position it had occupied in the consideration of marriage as a sacrament, and substituted the idea that the sacrament of marriage is conferred upon its recipients by the exchange of mutual consent. The significance of the act of coition was not, however, rejected. It was still accepted that the first act of coition indissolubly confirms the union of the man and the woman after the pattern of the indissoluble union of Christ and the Church. Hence the Roman Catholic Church retains the right to dissolve a marriage which has not been "consummated" in terms of coition even though the sacramental character has been conferred by the mutual consent of its partners. But the underlying theological difficulty remained; and even though Aquinas divorces genital sexual intercourse from that intimate and total association with original sin which it possesses in Augustinian thought and concedes that it cannot be entirely evil when performed by married persons in a state of grace for the purpose of begetting children, he still regards it as containing an intrinsic taint of evil—not of moral evil, but of evil proceeding from moral evil—and as inimical to the good life. If it is pursued for any purpose other than begetting children, then of course its degree of sin is greater—in marriage it is a venial sin, outside marriage a mortal sin.

Moreover, the fact that in the mind of mediaeval theologians marriage became invested with a sacramental character because of its symbolic link with the union of Christ and the Church did not mean that it was recognized as possessing the personal and metaphysical significance which might be thought to be implicit in such a status. The understanding of the symbolism was limited in a manner which prevented a full realization of its scope. A sacred symbolism becomes a creative or spiritualizing influence when it is seen as capable of acting upon the matter to which it applies in such a way that it helps to transform this matter into the reality which the symbolism is intended to signify. This presupposes the perception that within the matter to which the symbolism applies there is the capacity or the potentiality to be transformed in this way. In the case in point, if the symbolism of Christ and the Church applied to marriage is to have a creative or spiritualizing influence on marriage, it must be recognized that the relationship between man and woman is capable of being transformed into an eternal and metaphysical bond of the kind that exists between Christ and the Church. The relationship between man and woman must be recognized as possessing *a priori* this metaphysical and sacramental potentiality, a potentiality that is developed and brought to fruition partially at least through the sacred symbolism with which it is invested. It is only when it is perceived that there is an inherent, if concealed, correspondence or congeneracy between the reality which the symbolism is intended to signify and the matter to which it is applied, that the symbolism is able to operate as a transmuting or transforming agency. Only if it is understood that the relationship between man

and woman is capable of possessing an eternal and metaphysical character can it actually become a fully achieved sacramental union.

Neither in the thought of St. Augustine nor in that of the later scholastics is there any recognition that the relationship between man and woman is capable of attaining a sacramental dignity in this sense. Mediaeval theologians like William of St. Thierry and Aelred did elaborate a rich understanding of the significance of friendship and saw in it a way of return to the state of Paradise. But there is no doctrine in which sexual love is recognized as providing the basis of a spiritualizing process whose consummation is the union, soul and body, of man and woman in God, a revelation of the divine in and through their deepening sense of each other's being. The idea that the sexual relationship might create a metaphysical bond which death itself is powerless to destroy is alien to the mind of mediaeval theology as a whole. Marriage is regarded above all as an ecclesiastical or social institution designed for procreation. It is not regarded as a unique personal relationship and, as we have seen, the sexual element in it is considered only in its purely generative or genital aspect and even then with an undisguised hostility. In fact, not only are the personal aspects and spiritual potentiality of the sexual relationship ignored by mediaeval theology; but woman in her relationship with man is regarded as little more than at best a collaborator in the work of generation or a safety-valve for excess sexual pressures and at worst a pawn of the devil. For Fathers of the Church like Tertullian, it is woman who, profaning the Tree of Life, disfigures that exclusive image of God which is man, and drags him with her out of Paradise; and St. Augustine's own attitude towards and treatment of the woman with whom he had been living for thirteen years and who was the mother of his son, amply illustrate what little recognition a woman might expect as a person in her own right.

In view of all this, the fact that marriage was invested with a sacred symbolism, above all with that of Christ and the Church, and was on this account accorded a sacramental status, did not mean that the relationship between man and woman was looked on as something that might lead to the beatific vision or to personal deification. Instead, the symbolism was applied merely externally, and 'without any idea that it might be realized in an active mode in the relationship to which it was applied. Marriage was regarded as a sacrament not because it might become a metaphysical bond, but because it signified on another and unrelated level the union of Christ and the Church. Hence it must not be broken in this world not because the man and woman have achieved, or could achieve, an interior union which cannot be broken, but because to break it would be to break the symbolism of the supernatural union with which it was invested. In other words, it is quite sufficient for a marriage to conform outwardly to the symbolism for it to possess a sacramental character, even if inwardly there is nothing that corresponds to this character at all. In any case, the death of either the man or the woman was regarded as terminating the symbolism as well as the conjugal state to which it applied. It is true that in later mediaeval thought from the 12th century onwards, this purely exterior, legalistic and impersonal conception of the sacramental character of marriage is modified to include the idea that the consummated marriages of the baptized are ratified by divine grace and hence actually partake of the inner content of the symbolism which they exemplify; and that this is taken to signify not simply that a marriage must not be dissolved because that would be to break this symbolism, but that it could not be dissolved, any more than the supernatural union of its archetype itself could be dissolved. But this sacramental character is still regarded as conferred, effective and binding quite apart from the interior harmony and the reciprocity of qualities in the man and woman who are meant to embody it. It is still conceived dominantly in legalistic and ethical terms. Fundamentally, the attitude of the scholastics to the sexual relationship remains that of the earlier theologians: unlike celibacy, which represents an altogether higher state and remains the ideal, it

has no positive creative rôle in man's spiritual development and must always be a sign of his alienation from God.

In the post-mediaeval period many influences, from both within and without the Christian tradition, have led to an increased realization of the personal and spiritual significance of the sacramental idea of marriage and the sexual relationship. The Romance poets had conceived of this relationship as a unique personal experience transcending the conditions of procreation and family life and even of mortality itself, and as possessing a spiritual value that was its own justification and fulfillment; and although for the Romance poets this relationship was accompanied, in theory at any rate, by a great emphasis on virginity, the "rediscovery of the body" associated with the Renaissance and the growing belief that within such a relationship its physical expression was also God-given, meant that it was felt that the physical sexual factor could at least in certain circumstances be liberated from its intrinsic association with evil. But in western Christian thought itself what may be called the Augustinian-Scholastic heritage has not been displaced, although it has been modified in the way indicated above. This is well illustrated by a contemporary document, the encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*, issued by Pope Paul VI on the subject of marriage and the sexual relationship within marriage. This letter does not of course treat its subject in an exhaustive way, nor does it by any means represent the whole mind of the Christian tradition at the present time. But it does represent at least the official thinking of a most powerful organ of this tradition, the Roman Catholic Church; and it does vividly illustrate both the limitations of that whole line of Christian thought we have been examining, as well as some of the modifications that have been introduced into it over the last centuries.

After an opening preamble explaining the Church's competence to deal with these matters, the letter goes on to a consideration of the sexual relationship. Marriage, it is said, is not the result of the blind evolution of natural forces. It is the provident institution of God the Creator. This being the case, for what has it been provided? At first sight, it seems that something creative and enriching is going to be said, something that would show to what extent the idea of marriage as a sacrament has undergone an inner transformation in post-mediaeval Christian thought and would illuminate the purely personal significance, as an end in itself, of the Pauline symbolism of the union of Christ and the Church. Marriage, it is stated, is the mutual gift of husband and wife to each other. Through it, husband and wife develop that union in which they perfect one another. But this positive and enriching image of marriage is not enlarged on or even allowed to stand in its own right. It is made subordinate to the conventional non-sacramental view of the early theologians: that the principal end of marriage and that which uniquely specifies its nature is the procreation and education of children. We are told in effect that the perfection of each other which man and woman may achieve through marriage is not an end in itself, but exists "in order to co-operate with God in the generation and education of new lives". This is the ultimate purpose of marriage, its final *raison d'être*. It is not that through their union man and woman should achieve the integrity of the human creature by means of an inner transformation of the mortal and corrupt conditions of their present existence and the restoration of their fallen lives to the paradisaical state—a union and integrity therefore which potentially transcend the term of the conventional marriage-vow "until death do us part", since they have their roots in the very prolificity and incorruptibility of divine life itself. On the contrary, nothing further than a relationship whose term is the mortal limits of the fallen world is envisaged, and the ultimate purpose of this relationship is but the propagation of more lives within the materialized space-time process. It is to co-operate with God in the production of children. In this view of the ultimate purpose of marriage, God appears as the master of a great human stud in which married couples are "ordained to the procreation and bringing up of children", so that these presumably in

their turn may marry and beget, perpetuating in this way the history of man's disgrace into an indefinite and empty future.

Having re-affirmed in accordance with the general orientation of Christian thought that the chief end of marriage is to beget children, the letter now turns to a consideration of the purpose and function of the sexual factor within marriage. Or, rather, it turns to a consideration of the generative or genital act within marriage. Since it is the will of God that children should continue to be produced in this world, and since, the letter continues, human intelligence discovers that children can be born into this world only through observing the biological laws governing procreative life, it follows that the generative activity through which husband and wife fulfill the will of God is "honorable and good". Here there appears to be a modification of the Augustinian-Scholastic attitude according to which all generative activity is intrinsically tainted with evil, and which puts God in the absurd position of willing something—the procreation of children—while disapproving of the means through which it can be accomplished. Indeed, so far does this attitude appear to be displaced that it is now said that the co-operation of married partners with God in the begetting of children is so important that it is "absolutely required that *any use whatever of marriage* must retain the natural potential to procreate human life". It is recognized that the act of coition—and it may be noted here, though commented on later, that in common with earlier Christian thought in this respect the letter shows no awareness of any expression of sexuality between man and woman other than that which is carnal in this sense—may contribute to increasing the mutual love between the married pair; but it is clearly stated that such activity must never be divorced from its generative potential. This is because of "the inseparable connection, established by God, which man of his own initiative may not break, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance which are both inherent in the marriage act". The unitive act actualizes the capacity to generate new life; and this it does "as a result of laws written into the actual nature of man and woman"—laws which, because they express the will of God, must not be interfered with on human initiative. Any act of this kind which "impairs the capacity to transmit life which God the Creator, through specific laws, has built into it, frustrates His design which constitutes the norms of marriage, and contradicts the will of the Author of life". Hence, "to use this divine gift (the generative function) while depriving it, even if only potentially, of its meaning and purpose (to beget children), is equally repugnant to the nature of man and woman, and is consequently in opposition to the plan of God and His holy will".

It is at this point that the argument runs into difficulties. Although it is said that man may not of his own initiative break the unitive and procreative significance of the act of coition, and that any use whatever of marriage must retain the natural potential to procreate human life, yet it is recognized that this act continues to be honorable and good even when it is *foreseen to be infertile*. That is to say, the act of coition is admitted to have a positive value in and for itself apart from whether or not its use may lead to procreation, even indeed when it is consciously known that its use will not lead to procreation. So long as the infertility is not due to human intervention and so long as it is God who breaks the connection between the unitive and the procreative significance of the act of coition, then the "divine gift" may be totally deprived of what in one place is described as its meaning and purpose—the begetting of children—and yet retain a positive meaning and purpose within the context of married life. Moreover, this is so not only in cases in which the husband or the wife are permanently infertile through no fault of his or her own; it is also so when they take deliberate advantage of periods of infertility which occur in the normal course of biological events—those, specifically, provided by woman's menstrual cycle. Indeed, in the name of "responsible parenthood", the "human intelligence has the right and responsibility to control the forces of irrational nature provided this is done within the limits of the order of

reality established by God". This means that God has established woman's menstrual pattern, and so it is legitimate to take advantage of any provision He has made for infertility within this pattern. Although it is not stated in so many words, one is almost given the impression that it is assumed God has providentially provided these periods of infertility in the monthly cycle precisely so that genital activity may flourish then without the risk of conception! This, however, is not the point to be emphasized. The point to be emphasized is that so long as man and woman use a facility provided by nature to have intercourse knowing that no child will result, then this intercourse is good and honorable even when deprived of its procreative significance. And it continues to be good and honorable although there is a deliberate intention to avoid having children or the couple "mean to make sure that none will be born".

The conclusions which derive from this as to which methods of contraception are legitimate and which are not, need not concern us here. But it should be made clear that something very near hypocrisy would seem to be involved in the line of argument set out above. If it is absolutely required by the Church that *any use whatever of marriage* must retain its natural potential to create human life, how can one approve of a use of marriage in which the couple concerned deliberately take advantage for coition only of periods which they know to be infertile? If there is an inseparable connection, established by God, between the unitive significance and the procreative significance of coition, how does it retain its significance—continue to be good and honorable—when it has no procreative significance? If it is repugnant to the nature of man and woman, and also contrary to God's plan and holy will, to use the divine gift of the generative function while depriving it, even if only partially, of its meaning and purpose (the begetting of children), how is it not equally repugnant to man and woman and equally contrary to God's plan and holy will to use it with the specific intention of depriving it of its meaning and purpose—to use it, that is to say, when one knows as certainly as one can know that it will not beget children? To say that the vital qualitative difference in each case is whether it is God or man who has deprived the generative act of its natural potential to create human life, and that provided man sticks to the facility instituted by God (the infertile period) then he is not violating the purpose and meaning of this act even when he deliberately intends to avoid having children, and means to make sure none will be born, may pass as an adroit piece of legalistic or moral quibbling, but it is surely a very pathetic argument with which to present the mature Christian intelligence and conscience. It is an example of a kind of casuistry which ill becomes the treatment of so profound a human, and more than human, theme, and what it indicates is the basic insufficiency of the teaching which it purports to interpret and apply.

This insufficiency appears in relation to three interconnected assumptions, all briefly noted in what has already been said. The first is the assumption that it is God's will that man should go on endlessly begetting children within the mortal and corrupt conditions of this materialized universe, which is the scene and consequence of his fallen existence. According to this assumption, man and woman are reduced in marriage to the role of instruments serving to populate the void of a monstrous materialized space-time future and to do this in a way that is explicitly identified with serving the divine plan itself. This conception, by displacing the purpose and fulfillment of the relationship between man and woman from the center of their respective beings and projecting this purpose and fulfillment into an external, non-existent, cold and impersonal space-time continuum stretching into an entirely false infinity, adulterates the conjugal principle at its very heart. Man in this conception merely perpetuates his condition of slavery to a process in which his own personal created dignity is sacrificed to the abstract common good of a hypothetical future human society.

It is worth noting that what is here proposed as Christian teaching differs in this respect but

little from Communist teaching, which likewise claims that the purpose and fulfillment of the lives of individual men and women are to be found in serving the abstract good of a future human society. Indeed, that this is so is supported by the statement in the encyclical letter itself to the effect that in thus vindicating this teaching the Church is "convinced she is contributing to the creation of a truly human civilization". One would have thought that a Christian teaching should be concerned less with contributing to human civilization than with man and woman's participation in the kingdom "not of this world". It is in fact difficult to see how the point of view which puts so much emphasis on the begetting of children can be maintained unless the presuppositions concerning the idea of original sin which lie as the basis of the western theological tradition are first abandoned. According to these presuppositions, this world is a sinful world and a child conceived in it is conceived in sin and this sin is transmitted to it through conception. At the same time, Christianity is said to be a call to put an end to sin and to overcome the conditions which produce it. If this is the case, how, one might ask, can Christian theologians exhort men and women to continue to beget children when the act of begetting them and the world into which they are begotten simply perpetuate those conditions that Christianity intends to overcome and requires all men and women to overcome? One does not free oneself from debts by incurring more debts. Indeed, whatever one's view of original sin, it would appear that in so far as Christianity is concerned with the transfiguration of the world there must be a basic—and on one level tragic—conflict between participation in the kingdom "not of this world" and the biological continuation of the human race in this world; and that to ignore this conflict in the way that so much Christian thought does ignore it is to forfeit a competence to interpret the realities of the Christian faith.

The second assumption is intimately connected with the first. As we remarked, the encyclical opens with a brief statement explaining the Church's competence to speak on the matter under discussion. The Church, it is said, is the interpreter of the moral law. The moral law is based on natural law as illuminated and enriched by divine Revelation. This is possible because natural laws express the will of God. This means that the will of God is expressed in the processes of nature, so that the processes of nature are in themselves sacred. What happens in nature happens because God wants it to happen like that. It contributes to the divine scheme or plan of the universe. It must not therefore be interfered with by man acting on his own initiative, for that would be to violate the will of God. It would be to disobey the moral law—God's law for man. It follows that if the laws and processes of nature express God's will and are geared, as they are where human biological functions are concerned, to the production of children in this materialized world, then it must be God's will that mankind continues to produce children in this world through the use of these functions. This conclusion, maintained in the letter, necessarily derives from this second assumption concerning the relationship between the moral and the natural law.

The point that must be stressed is not the validity of the relationship itself, but that what is meant by nature in this context—and this is in line with the main stream of western theology—appears to be nature in its present state, not as it is in its original state, as it issued from the hand of God "in the beginning". We are here within an order of theology which represents an uneasy alliance between the conception of original sin indicated above and Aristotelian optimism in respect of mundane existence. The effect of this alliance is that to all intents and purposes the event described as the "fall of man" is treated as something that conforms to the will of God, and consequently there is no sharp distinction made between the order of nature prior to the fall and the order of nature subsequent to the fall: both are treated as expressing the will of God. Man's fallen life and the natural processes to which he is subject in the fallen world also express the

will, pleasure and purpose of God, and so may be taken as constituting the norm on which the moral law of the Church is to be based. There is no recognition that life in the world as it is—the world which comes within the sphere of his everyday observation—is profoundly abnormal and unnatural where man is concerned, and concomitantly where everything else is concerned as well. There is no acknowledgement that it is not that which God has created or intended for man, but is what man has brought on himself as a result of his own defection and error. There is consequently no recognition that the norm for what is natural for man, and hence what constitutes the moral law, may lie in a completely different order of reality, and that to derive it from this world as it has become, and man's life as it is now being lived in this world, is to mistake human error and its consequences for divine ordinance. If it is understood that it is not the fallen state of nature and of man which is natural, but their pre-fallen and paradisaical state, and that it is this state which expresses the will of God, then a quite different attitude to the relationship between the moral and natural law will prevail, and quite different conclusions may be drawn from it as a consequence.

According to this latter attitude, which is that of the eastern Christian tradition, what is regarded as man's natural life, and so as the norm providing the basis for the moral law, is that of the original creation. Man's life as it is now, in this world, and the biological processes to which he is subject, are not regarded as natural, but as a consequence of a breach in nature, a declension from the natural state, and an entering into conditions that are abnormal and corrupt. And, it is understood, this breach and dislocation in man's natural state—this fall into a materialized space-time universe—has not only resulted in a loss of spiritual vision and in the contracting of the human mind to the perspectives of a fundamentally unreal world; it has also introduced a corresponding alteration in the laws of nature itself, so that these too are now tainted by something of the abnormality and corruption which vitiates human life itself. They are not these laws as they are ordained by God. They are these laws deformed and denaturalized by the fall of Adam—a fall which itself is profoundly "unnatural" and *contrary to the will of God*. To accept, in the manner of western Christian thought, the laws of nature and natural processes as they appear to the human mind in this fallen world as expressing the will of God and therefore as constituting the norm for the moral law, is to shift the responsibility for a human act that is contrary to the will of God from man to God, and to make God the ultimate author not only of man's crime but also of the abnormal and corrupt conditions of the world which issues from it. God becomes responsible for that state of servitude to which man reduces himself and the whole natural order as a result of his assertion of a false liberty in the face of his Creator. The divergence between eastern and western Christian thought on the fall of man and its consequences is profound; and it is Of course the western point of view which supports the second assumption underlying the teaching on marriage expounded in the encyclical letter.

The third assumption is also intimately connected with the two already mentioned. It is that the unitive significance of the sexual relationship between man and woman is inseparably connected with its procreative significance, and hence with the act of coition. It is intimately linked with the two previous assumptions because if the purpose of marriage is to co-operate with God in the propagation of more and more children in this fallen world, and if (the example of Mary the Mother of God notwithstanding) the genital mode of propagation is ordained by God so that His will in this respect may be obeyed, it follows that to separate the sexual relationship between man and woman from its biological procreative functions is, as the letter states, in opposition to the plan of God and his holy will. Copulation, that is to say, must thrive. We have already noted the difficulties to which such a view must inevitably lead, and have seen that in fact the unitive significance of the genital act is admitted even when husband and wife use it with

the deliberate and conscious intention to avoid having children and mean to make sure than none will be born.

It is not so much this, however, that represents the insufficiency of the assumption in question. It is that it seems to identify the expression of the *sexual* relationship or *sexual* communion between man and woman in a more or less exclusive manner with the act of coition, so that it is regarded as fulfilled in this act. As it is precisely here that the encyclical letter reflects what is perhaps the basic shortcoming of that tradition of Christian thought we have been considering, we can leave the specific discussion of the letter and examine this point in relation to that whole tradition.

We have remarked how early Christian theologians appear to have been incapable of envisaging any aspect of sexuality other than its purely generative or genital expression, and we have seen how this attitude has continued to characterize Christian thought down to the present day. What we have not stressed is that such an attitude, which leads to isolating the copulatory act from the totality of the relationship between the sexes, is extremely false and dangerous, and has had disastrous consequences in many spheres of human behavior. In effect, Christian thought seems to have made the worst of all worlds in its attitude to the sexual life. First, it has to all intents and purposes refused to recognize in the sexual relationship any purpose other than the procreation of children. Then, in spite of its frequent denigration of the act of coition itself, it has pressed this act into symbolic service for a reality—that of the union of Christ and the Church—to which at best it can be analogous only in a very remote manner and to which it must in itself always remain extrinsic: it cannot in itself be transformed into the reality it is intended to symbolize, and this, as we noted, amounts to a denial of the very principle of all sacred symbolism. This means that this act has been charged with a significance which is totally incommensurate with its nature and which can only be realized between man and woman through the development of potentialities that transcend this particular aspect of their relationship. The result is that the act of coition has become hopelessly idealized. It is viewed as the sign of a supernatural union, the crux of the sexual life, and as that through which the sacrament of marriage is consummated. By regarding what is at best an imperfect and all too often a most crude and inhuman form of sexual communion between man and woman as though it were the most complete form, and by largely ignoring other forms of such communion, Christian thought in this matter may be said to have prepared the intellectual ground for the dislocation and debasement of man's sexual life of which the consequences are only too evident today. The failure to perceive and affirm any positive or creative value in the sexual relationship apart from procreation, together with the habit of regarding the act of coition as the crux of the sexual life, has meant that now when improved forms of contraception have made it possible to divorce this act more or less effectively from its procreative function, not only does it continue to be regarded as the crux of the sexual life, but also, through the lapse of Christian belief, it is basically reduced to having no significance apart from the pleasure or relief it gives. It follows that there is little to impede the idea that it may and even should be carried out more or less indiscriminately and whenever the opportunity arises without this in the least degrading either the act itself or those who perform it in this way. In other words, the failure to place this act within the full sacramental context of a personal relationship engaging the whole beings of the man and woman concerned has meant that it has been impossible to regard it in a manner that does not lead either to its idealization or to its abuse or to both at once.

If one now asks how Christian teaching has come to concentrate so one-sidedly on the genital aspect of the sexual relationship, the answer is that this stems directly from the too simple assumption that the principal end of marriage and that which uniquely specifies its nature is the

procreation and education of children. Once this assumption is made, the emphasis in Christian thought on genital intercourse isolated from other aspects of the full sexual relationship is quite logical, because it is genital intercourse irrespective of other aspects of the relationship that produces children. Consequently, this intercourse is not considered primarily within the context of the man-woman relationship regarded as an end in its own right and apart from the propagation of children; it is considered primarily as a biological activity designed exclusively for that purpose. Christian teaching on marriage has literally made a religion out of having children. In fact, such a religion has it made out of having children that in spite of its ambivalent attitude towards the act of coition itself, it may be said to be among the great promoters of this act, provided it takes place within the limits of the marriage contract. Within the marriage contract, the begetting of children is regarded as a praiseworthy and even as a divinely approved activity whatever the circumstances. There is no real concern for the inner quality of the married relationship itself and no real understanding that for married couples to produce children in certain circumstances may be little short of sacrilege or even murder. Outside the marriage contract, there must be no genital intercourse, however deep the relationship between the man and the woman may be. But once legally married, the couple are exhorted to be fruitful and multiply virtually without restriction and certainly without there being a question of whether the marriage is a marriage in the true sense—a union and reciprocity of soul and body. It is in accord with this attitude that the Christian priest is asked to give his blessing to unions that in effect may be entirely graceless and unspiritual; and he may grant communion to one who is "faithful" to his or her married state whether or not there is any true love in it. Moreover, the criterion of faithfulness itself in Christian thought tends to have reference only to the genital act; and in spite of the Christian gospel it tends to count as adultery only what has been committed in the most explicit way, not also what has been committed "in the heart". Such an attitude not only results in debasing the priestly function in this respect; it also means that in relation to the sexual life the Church itself comes virtually to be regarded as little more than a kind of brothel of which the priest is the bawd: the point of marrying in the Church is that it makes it possible, almost obligatory, to have "legal" or at least not mortally sinful genital intercourse.

All this may be justified on the grounds that if the procreation and education of children is the chief end of marriage, it is vitally important to preserve the institution of marriage at all costs, because to produce children in our society outside the context of an established and legally and socially recognized institution such as marriage could be to expose them to quite unwarranted suffering—something which individuals have a right to do with regard to themselves, but not with regard to those yet unborn. The fact that the procreation of children is deliberately encouraged in conditions which are likely to expose them to an equally great and equally unwarranted suffering, and that this is justified on the grounds that the parents are legally married, is simply another example of the confusion and hypocrisy in which so much Christian thought in this matter is involved.

Whatever support may be found for it, however, it remains true none the less that the view of the principal end of marriage to which Christian thought has been committed virtually from the beginning and by which it is still restricted, does in fact cut directly across the idea of marriage as a sacramental reality in its own right as well as across the potentialities of sexual communion in the fully developed man-woman relationship. No doubt the propagation and education of children is or may be one motive for marriage which must be taken into account, even though, given the Christian understanding of the present sinful state of the world and the fact that Christianity is a summons to participate in the kingdom "not of this world", it is difficult to see on what grounds a teaching that makes virtually a cult out of generation in this world can

be justified from the Christian point of view. But to make this the main motive is to subordinate the idea of marriage as a unique personal relationship with a spiritual purpose and value that are their own fulfillment and justification to the idea of marriage as an ecclesiastical or social institution concerned with the well-being of the family in the materialized space-time dimensions of fallen human existence.

Moreover, not only does this dominantly legalistic and ethical view of marriage mean promoting and lending support to countless marriages that are little more than licensed harlotry; it also means preserving the fiction that the main motive for sexual communion is not a strongly felt impulse to unite which at the time over-rides all other motives, but both should and could be a desire to propagate. This impulse to unite may of course lead to the act of coition and hence to propagation; but where man and woman are concerned the kind of union to which it points and to which indeed it may be said to be a summons (however misunderstood and however frequently ignored by those to whom it is made) is not one which in itself can be fulfilled either through the act of coition or through the production of offspring. In the man-woman relationship regarded from the point of view of its sexual totality, the act of coition is but one aspect of the whole soul-body communion, and its procreative function may often be of incidental or even of no significance.

Yet in spite of the relative failure of both the writings of Christian theologians and official pronouncements of the Church to affirm the full potentialities of the primal relationship between man and woman as these have been indicated in the opening pages of this essay, the Christian tradition itself does in fact bear living witness to them. First, it is not accidental that it preserves at the heart of its sacred books *The Song of Songs*, a drama in which the man and the woman are seen as passionately engaged in the discovery of the ultimate ground of their being that is at once the lost Paradise and the image of God in which they are created. Then, it is not accidental that the opening chapters of two of the Christian gospels throw further scriptural light on this archetypal human relationship in depicting a specific man and woman whose mutual involvement forms the immediate background to the Annunciation and so is a condition of the Incarnation itself: not until Joseph took Mary into his care could she, the perfect woman, give birth to her immaculately conceived offspring, the perfect man. Finally, it is the Christian tradition which, in the face of all attempts to reduce it to a matter of social convenience or to a purely physical or human affair, has insisted that this relationship, properly understood and lived, possesses or should possess a sacramental dignity. To whatever extent Christian thought may have denied the full implications of this, or been crippled by evasion and duplicity in its approach to it, it has at least always affirmed it. And ultimately it is this which is important: because what is recognized as a sacrament must in the end and in spite of all contradictions be acknowledged to enshrine in its own right the highest spiritual potentialities and creative significance.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

According to Meister Eckhart, Every sign, every holiness, every perfection possible to creature our Lady had par excellence. To take her holiness, it was so prodigious that our Lady never sinned. Of signs, again, she had the chief one, that of being God's mother; albeit our theologians do contend that our Lady was far happier uniting God to godhead than she was in giving carnal birth to God. As to the over-fullness our Lady got from deity, she was worthy of it, bearing as she did God in the flesh. Soul overbrimming like this overflows into the body and makes the body like it. Thus she was God's carnal mother. Accordingly some doctors do affirm that mental concepts tell upon the body more than physicians do with all their drugs. God is never born except in souls which have put creatures under their feet. Our philosophers say, Perfect rest is freedom from all motion.

MEISTER ECKHART.

¹ For an admirable summary of the views of St. Augustine and other western mediaeval theologians on the sexual relationship, see: D. S. Bailey, *The Man-woman Relationship in Christian Thought* (London, 1959).