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# Theology and Sexuality

## *Classic and Contemporary Readings*

*Edited by*

Eugene F. Rogers, Jr.

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Williams

# The Body's Grace

*Rowan D. Williams*

*This essay represents the best 10 pages written about sexuality in the twentieth century. It manages to say not only what sexuality is for, but what marriage is for, what celibacy is for, and what Christianity is for. It supplies many of the principles for interpreting and selecting other essays in this anthology.*

*Critics have objected that it offers no "argument," by which they mean that it does not argue on their terms. Rather it argues from* convenientia, *or fittingness, a time-honored Christian technique of elaboration or thick description that aims to exhibit or display how one doctrine fits in well with others. Here, Williams aims to show how committed same-sex relationships fit well with what Christians have said about the purposes of marriage, celibacy, and the Christian life.*

*The essay is unusual in that its argumentation is theologically "high." So, far from beginning with experience, the argument proper begins instead with an account of God's Trinitarian life, while the lives of celibates, rather than the experience of the well-sexed, provide the heuristic clue to what sex might be about.*

*(Although it does begin with a story that has offended some readers, the story serves a purpose of discovery rather than morality. Many biblical stories might have been deployed in a similar way. One thinks of the women in the genealogy of Jesus: Ruth, Tamar, Bathsheba, any of them might have told a story like Sarah's in the essay.)*

*Sexuality, like grace, involves the transformation that comes from seeing oneself as desired by another. That other is primarily God. For some the desire of God is modeled and mediated through another human being; for others it seems to come directly. Celibates teach us that it is God who desires us, without denying that most will find transformation more effectively in relationship with another person (of the same or opposite sex) from whose transformative perceptions they cannot easily escape.*

*The essay is very dense; every sentence counts; it repays two or three readings; and you have understood it when you get the jokes. I call your attention to two widely separated paragraphs that seem to me to hold together the main points of the essay. You understand it, too, when you see how these paragraphs fit together:*

> *Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.*
>
> *The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us,* as if we were God, *as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.*
>
> *The life of the Christian community has as its rationale – if not invariably its practical reality – the task of teaching us [that, to teach us] to so order our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy.*
>
> *. . . [T]he body's grace itself only makes human sense if we have a language of grace in the first place; this in turn depends on having a language of creation and redemption. To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify most clearly and hopefully if we have also learned, or are learning, about being the object of the causeless, loving delight of God, being the object of God's love for God through incorporation into the community of God's Spirit and the taking-on of the identity of God's Child. It is because of our need to keep that perspective clear before us that the community needs some who are called beyond or aside from the ordinary patterns of sexual relation to put their identities directly into the hands of God in the single life . . .*

Why does sex matter? Most people know that sexual intimacy is in some ways frightening for them, that it is quite simply the place where they began to be taught whatever maturity they have. Most of us know that the whole business is irredeemably comic, surrounded by so many odd chances and so many opportunities for making a fool of yourself. Plenty know that it is the place where they are liable to be most profoundly damaged or helpless. Culture in general and religion in particular have devoted enormous energy to the doomed task of getting it right. In this essay, I want to try and understand a little better why the task is doomed, and why the fact that it's doomed is a key to seeing more fully why and how it matters – and even seeing more fully what this mattering has to do with God.

Best to start from a particular thing, a particular story. Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* is full of poignant and very deep analyses of the tragedies of sexuality: the theme which drives through all four novels and unites their immense rambling plots is Ronald Merrick's destruction and corruption of his own humanity and that of all who fall into his hands. That corruption effectively begins at the moment he discovers how he is aroused, how his privacy is invaded, by the desirable body of a man, and he is appalled and terrified by this.





His first attempt to punish and obliterate the object of his desire is what unleashes the forces of death and defilement that follow him everywhere thereafter. Sexual refusal is dramatized by him in enactments of master–slave relations: he humiliates what he longs for, so that his dominion is not challenged and so that the sexual disaster becomes a kind of political tragedy. Merrick is an icon of the "body politic": his terror, his refusal, and his corruption stand as a metaphor of the Raj itself, of power willfully turning away from the recognition of those wants and needs that only vulnerability to the despised and humiliated stranger can open up and satisfy.

Interwoven with Merrick's tragedy is the story of Sarah Layton, a figure constantly aware of her powerlessness before events, her inability to undo the injuries and terrors of the past, but no less constantly trying to see and respond truthfully and generously. At the end of the second novel in the sequence, Sarah is seduced, lovelessly but not casually: her yielding is prompted perhaps more than anything by her seducer's mercilessly clear perception of her. She does not belong, he tells her, however much she tries to give herself to the conventions of the Raj. Within her real generosity is a lost and empty place: "You don't know anything about joy at all, do you?"[1]

Absent from the life of the family she desperately tries to prop up, absent from the life of European society in India, Sarah is present fully to no one and nothing. Her innate truthfulness and lack of egotistical self-defense mean that she is able to recognize this once the remark is made: there is no joy for her, because she is not able to be anywhere. When she is at last coaxed into bed, as they "enact" a tenderness that is not really that of lovers, Sarah comes to herself: hours later, on the train journey back to her family, she looks in the mirror and sees that "she had entered her body's grace."[2]

What does this mean? The phrase recurs more than once in the pages of the novel that follow, but it is starkly clear that there is no lasting joy for Sarah. There is a pregnancy and an abortion; a continuing loneliness. Yet nothing in this drainingly painful novel suggests that the moment of the "body's grace" for Sarah was a deceit. Somehow she has been aware of what it was and was not: a frontier has been passed, and that has been and remains grace; a being present, even though this can mean knowing that the graced body is now more than ever a source of vulnerability. But it is still grace, a filling of the void, an entry into some different kind of identity. There may have been little love, even little generosity, in Sarah's lovemaking, but she has discovered that her body can be the cause of happiness to her and to another. It is this discovery which most clearly shows why we might want to talk about grace here. Grace, for the Christian believer, is a transformation that depends in large part on knowing yourself to be seen in a certain way: as significant, as wanted.

The whole story of creation, incarnation, and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as

if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the Trinity. We are created so that we may be caught up in this, so that we may grow into the wholehearted love of God by learning that God loves us as God loves God.

The life of the Christian community has as its rationale – if not invariably its practical reality – the task of teaching us to so order our relations that human beings may see themselves as desired, as the occasion of joy. It is not surprising that sexual imagery is freely used, in and out of the Bible, for this newness of perception. What is less clear is why the fact of sexual desire, the concrete stories of human sexuality rather than the generalizing metaphors it produces, are so grudgingly seen as matters of grace, or only admitted as matters of grace when fenced with conditions. Understanding this involves us in stepping back to look rather harder at the nature of sexual desire; and this is where abstractness and overambitious theory threaten.

In one of the few sensible and imaginative accounts of sexual desire by a philosopher, Thomas Nagel writes:

> Sexual desire involves a kind of perception, but not merely a single perception of its object, for in the paradigm case of mutual desire there is a complex system of superimposed mutual perceptions – not only perceptions of the sexual object, but perceptions of oneself. Moreover, sexual awareness of another involves considerable self-awareness to begin with – more than is involved in ordinary sensory perception.[3]

Initially I may be aroused by someone unaware of being perceived by me, and that arousal is significant in "identifying me with my body" in a new way, but is not yet sufficient for speaking about the full range of sexuality. I am aroused as a cultural, not just a biological being; I need, that is, to bring my body into the shared world of language and (in the widest sense) "intercourse." My arousal is not only my business: I need its cause to know about it, to recognize it, for it to be anything more than a passing chance. So my desire, if it is going to be sustained and developed, must itself be perceived; and, if it is to develop as it naturally tends to, it must be perceived as desirable by the other – that is, my arousal and desire must become the cause of someone else's desire.

For my desire to persist and have some hope of fulfillment, it must be exposed to the risks of being seen by its object. Nagel sees the whole complex process as a special case of what's going on in any attempt to share, in language, what something means. Part of my making sense to you depends on my knowing that you can "see" that I want to make sense. And my telling you or showing you that this is what I want implies that I "see" you as wanting to understand.





"Sex has a related structure: it involves a desire that one's partner be aroused by the recognition of one's desire that he or she be aroused."[4]

All this means that in sexual relation I am no longer in charge of what I am. *Any* genuine experience of desire leaves me in this position: I cannot of myself satisfy my wants without distorting or trivializing them. But in *this* experience we have a particularly intense case of the helplessness of the ego alone. For my body to be the cause of joy, the end of homecoming, for me, it must be there for someone else, must be perceived, accepted, nurtured. And that means being given over to the creation of joy in that other, because only as directed to the enjoyment, the happiness, of the other does it become unreservedly lovable. To desire my joy is to desire the joy of the one I desire: my search for enjoyment through the bodily presence of another is a longing to be enjoyed in my body. As Blake put it, sexual partners "admire" in each other "the lineaments of gratified desire." We are pleased because we are pleasing.

It is in this perspective, Nagel says, that we can understand the need for a language of sexual failure, immaturity, even "perversion." Solitary sexual activity works at the level of release of tension and a particular localized physical pleasure; but insofar as it has nothing much to do with being perceived from beyond myself in a way that changes my self-awareness, it isn't of much interest for a discussion of sexuality as process and relation, and says little about grace. In passing, Nagel makes a number of interesting observations on sexual encounters that either allow no exposed spontaneity because they are bound to specific methods of sexual arousal – like sado-masochism – or that permit only a limited awareness of the embodiment of the other because there is an unbalance in the relation such that the desire of the other for me is irrelevant or minimal – rape, pedophilia, bestiality.[5] These "asymmetrical" sexual practices have some claim to be called perverse in that they leave one agent in effective control of the situation – one agent, that is, who doesn't have to wait upon the desire of the other. (Incidentally, if this suggests that, in a great many cultural settings, the socially licensed norm of heterosexual intercourse is a "perversion" – well, that is a perfectly serious suggestion.)

If we bracket, for the moment, the terminology of what is normative or ideal, it seems that at least we have here a picture of what sexuality might mean at its most *comprehensive*. And the moral question, I suspect, ought to be: How much do we want our sexual activity to communicate? How much do we want it to display a breadth of human possibility and a sense of the body's capacity to heal and enlarge the life of others? Nagel's reflections suggest that some kinds of sexual activity distort or confine the human resourcefulness, the depth or breadth of meaning such activity may carry: they involve assuming that sexual activity has less to do with the business of human growth and human integrity than we know it can have. Decisions about sexual lifestyle, the ability to identify certain patterns as sterile, undeveloped, or even corrupt, are, in this light,

decisions about what we want our bodily life to say, how our bodies are to be brought into the whole project of "making human sense" for ourselves and each other.

To be able to make such decisions is important. A purely conventional (heterosexual) morality simply absolves us from the difficulties we might meet in doing so. The question of human meaning is not raised, nor are we helped to see what part sexuality plays in our learning to be human with one another – to enter the body's grace – because all we need to know is that sexual activity is licensed in one context and in no other. Not surprising, then, if the reaction is often either, "It doesn't matter what I do (say) with my body, because it's my inner life and emotions that matter" or, "The only criterion is what gives pleasure and does no damage." Both of those responses are really to give up on the human seriousness of all this.

They are also, like conventional ethics, attempts to get rid of risk. Nagel comes close to saying what I believe needs saying here, that sexual "perversion" is sexual activity without risk, without the dangerous acknowledgment that my joy depends on someone else's, as theirs does on mine. Distorted sexuality is the effort to bring my happiness back under my control and to refuse to let my body be recreated by another person's perception. And this is, in effect, to withdraw my body from the enterprise of human beings making sense in collaboration, in community, withdrawing my body from language, culture, and politics. Most people who have bothered to think about it have noticed a certain tendency for odd sorts of sexual activity to go together with political distortion and corruption (the *Raj Quartet*'s Merrick again – indeed, the whole pathology of the torturer). What women writers like Susan Griffin have taught us about the politics of pornography has sharpened this observation.

But how do we manage this risk, the entry into a collaborative way of making sense of our whole material selves? It is this, of course, that makes the project of "getting it right" doomed, as I suggested earlier. Nothing will stop sex being tragic and comic. It is above all the area of our lives where we can be rejected in our bodily entirety, where we can venture into the "exposed spontaneity" that Nagel talks about and find ourselves looking foolish or even repellent, so that the perception of ourselves we are offered is negating and damaging (homosexuals, I think, know rather a lot about this). And it is also where the awful incongruity of our situation can break through as comedy, even farce. I'm tempted, by the way, to say that only cultures and people that have a certain degree of moral awareness about how sex forms persons, and an awareness therefore of moral and personal risk in it all, can actually find it funny: the pornographer and the scientific investigator of how to maximize climaxes don't as a rule seem to see much of the dangerous absurdity of the whole thing.

The misfire or mismatch of sexual perception is, like any dialogue at cross-purposes, potentially farcical – no less so for being on the edge of pain.





Shakespeare (as usual) knows how to tread such a difficult edge: do we or don't we laugh at Malvolio? For he is transformed by the delusion that he is desired – and if such transformations, such conversions, were not part of our sexual experience, we should not see any joke.

And it's because this is ultimately serious that the joke breaks down. Malvolio is funny, and what makes him funny is also what makes the whole episode appallingly and irreconcilably hurtful. The man has, after all, ventured a tiny step into vulnerability, into the shared world of sexually perceived bodies, and he has been ruthlessly mocked and denied. In a play which is almost overloaded with sexual ambivalence and misfiring desires, Malvolio demonstrates brutally just why all the "serious" characters are in one or another sort of mess about sex, all holding back from sharing and exposure, in love with private fantasies of generalized love.

The discovery of sexual joy and of a pattern of living in which that joy is accessible must involve the insecurities of "exposed spontaneity" – the experience of misunderstanding or of the discovery (rapid or slow) that this relationship is not about joy. These discoveries are bearable, if at all, because at least they have changed the possibilities of our lives in a way which may still point to what joy might be. But it should be clear that the discovery of joy means something rather more than the bare facts of sexual intimacy. I can only fully discover the body's grace in taking time, the time needed for a mutual recognition that my partner and I are not simply passive instruments to each other. Such things are learned in the fabric of a whole relation of converse and cooperation; yet of course the more time taken the longer a kind of risk endures. There is more to expose, and a sustaining of the will to let oneself be formed by the perceptions of another. Properly understood, sexual faithfulness is not an avoidance of risk, but the creation of a context in which grace can abound because there is a commitment not to run away from the perception of another.

When we bless sexual unions, we give them a life, a reality not dependent on the contingent thoughts and feelings of the people involved; but we do this so that they may have a certain freedom to "take time" to mature and become as profoundly nurturing as they can. We should not do it in order to create a wholly impersonal and enforceable "bond"; if we do, we risk turning blessing into curse, grace into law, art into rule-keeping.

In other words, I believe that the promise of faithfulness, the giving of unlimited time to each other, remains central for understanding the full "resourcefulness" and grace of sexual union. I simply don't think we would grasp all that was involved in the mutual transformation of sexually linked persons without the reality of unconditional public commitments: more perilous, more demanding, more promising.

Yet the realities of our experience in looking for such possibilities suggest pretty clearly that an absolute declaration that every sexual partnership must

conform to the pattern of commitment or else have the nature of sin *and nothing else* is unreal and silly. People do discover – as does Sarah Layton – a grace in encounters fraught with transitoriness and without much "promising" (in any sense): it may be just this that prompts them to want the fuller, longer exploration of the body's grace that faithfulness offers. Recognizing this – which is no more than recognizing the facts of a lot of people's histories, heterosexual or homosexual, in our society – ought to be something we can do without generating anxieties about weakening or compromising the focal significance of commitment and promise in our Christian understanding and "moral imagining" of what sexual bonding can be.

Much more damage is done here by the insistence on a fantasy version of heterosexual marriage as the solitary ideal, when the facts of the situation are that an enormous number of "sanctioned" unions are a framework for violence and human destructiveness on a disturbing scale; sexual union is not delivered from moral danger and ambiguity by satisfying a formal socioreligious criterion. Decisions about sexual lifestyle, to repeat, are about how much we want our bodily selves to mean, rather than what emotional needs we're meeting or what laws we're satisfying. "Does this mean that we are using faith to undermine law? By no means: we are placing law itself on a firmer footing" (Rom. 3:31, *NEB*). Happily there is more to Paul than the (much quoted in this context) first chapter of Romans!

I have suggested that the presence or absence of the body's grace has a good deal to do with matters other than the personal. It has often been said, especially by feminist writers, that the making of my body into a distant and dangerous object that can be either subdued or placated with quick gratification is the root of sexual oppression. If my body isn't me, then the desiring perception of my body is bound up with an area of danger and foreignness, and I act toward whatever involves me in desiring and being desired with fear and hostility. Man fears and subdues woman; and – the argument continues – this licenses and grounds a whole range of processes that are about the control of the strange: "nature," the foreigner, the unknowable future. This is not to assert uncritically that sexual disorder is the cause of every human pathology, but to grant, first, that it is pervasively present in all sorts of different disorders, and second, that it constitutes a kind of paradigm case of wrongness and distortion, something that shows us what it is like to refuse the otherness of the material world and to try to keep it other and distant and controlled. It is a paradigm of how not to make sense in its retreat from the uncomfortable knowledge that I cannot make sense of myself without others, cannot speak until I've listened, cannot love myself without being the object of love or enjoy myself without being the cause of joy.





Thinking about sexuality in its fullest implications involves thinking about entering into a sense of oneself *beyond* the customary imagined barrier between the "inner" and the "outer," the private and the shared. We are led into the knowledge that our identity is being made in the relations of bodies, not by the private exercise of will or fantasy: we belong with and to each other, not to our "private" selves – as Paul said of mutual sexual commitment (1 Cor. 7:4) – and yet are not instruments for each other's gratification.

All this, moreover, is not only potentially but actually a *political* knowledge, a knowledge of what ordered human community might be. Without a basic political myth of how my welfare depends on yours and yours on mine, a myth of personal needs in common that can only be met by mutuality, we condemn ourselves to a politics of injustice and confrontation. Granted that a lot of nonsense has been talked about the politics of eroticism recently, we should still acknowledge that an understanding of our sexual needs and possibilities is a task of real political importance. Sexuality-related "issues" cannot be isolated from the broader project of social recreation and justice.

As I hinted earlier, the body's grace itself only makes human sense if we have a language of grace in the first place; this in turn depends on having a language of creation and redemption. To be formed in our humanity by the loving delight of another is an experience whose contours we can identify most clearly and hopefully if we have also learned, or are learning, about being the object of the causeless, loving delight of God, being the object of God's love for God through incorporation into the community of God's Spirit and the taking-on of the identity of God's Child. It is because of our need to keep that perspective clear before us that the community needs some who are called beyond or aside from the ordinary patterns of sexual relation to put their identities directly into the hands of God in the single life. This is not an alternative to the discovery of the body's grace. All those taking up the single vocation must know something about desiring and being desired if their single vocation is not to be sterile and evasive. Their decision (which is as risky as the commitment to sexual fidelity) is to see if they can find themselves, their bodily selves, in a life dependent simply upon trust in the generous delight of God – that Other who, by definition, cannot want us to supply deficiencies in the bliss of a divine ego, but whose whole life is a "being-for," a movement of gift.

Sebastian Moore remarks that "True celibates are rare – not in the sense of superior but in the sense that watchmakers are rare."[6] Finding a bodily/sexual identity through trying to expose yourself first and foremost to the desirous perception of God is difficult and precarious in a way not many of us realize, and it creates problems in dealing with the fact that sexual desiring and being desired do not simply go away in the single life. Turning such experience constantly toward the context of God's desire is a heavy task – time is to be given to God rather than to one human focus for sexual commitment. But this

extraordinary experiment does seem to be "justified in its children," in two obvious ways. There is the great freedom of the celibate mystic in deploying the rhetoric of erotic love in speaking of God; and, even more important, there is that easy acceptance of the body, its needs and limitations, which we find in mature celibates like Teresa of Avila in her last years. Whatever the cost, this vocation stands as an essential part of the background to understanding the body's grace: paradoxical as it sounds, the celibate calling has, as one aspect of its role in the Christian community, the nourishing and enlarging of Christian sexuality.

It is worth wondering why so little of the agitation about sexual morality and the status of homosexual men and women in the church in recent years has come from members of our religious orders. I strongly suspect that a lot of celibates indeed have a keener sensitivity about these matters than some of their married fellow Christians. And anyone who knows the complexities of the true celibate vocation would be the last to have any sympathy with the extraordinary idea that homosexual orientation is an automatic pointer to the celibate life – almost as if celibacy before God is less costly, even less risky, for the homosexual than the heterosexual.

It is impossible, when we're trying to reflect on sexuality, not to ask just where the massive cultural and religious anxiety about same-sex relationships that is so prevalent at the moment comes from. In this final section I want to offer some thoughts about this problem. I wonder whether it is to do with the fact that same-sex relations oblige us to think directly about bodiliness and sexuality in a way that socially and religiously sanctioned heterosexual unions do not. When we're thinking about the latter, there are other issues involved, notably what one neo-Marxist sociologist called the ownership of the means of production of human beings. Married sex has, in principle, an openness to the more tangible goals of producing children; its "justification" is more concrete than what I've been suggesting as the inner logic and process of the sexual relation itself. If we can set the movement of sexual desire within this larger purpose, we can perhaps more easily accommodate the embarrassment and insecurity of desire: it's all for a good cause, and a good cause that can be visibly and plainly evaluated in its usefulness and success.

Same-sex love annoyingly poses the question of what the meaning of desire is – in itself, not considered as instrumental to some other process, such as the peopling of the world. We are brought up against the possibility not only of pain and humiliation without any clear payoff, but, just as worryingly, of nonfunctional joy – of joy, to put it less starkly, whose material "production" is an embodied person aware of grace. The question is the same as the one raised for some kinds of moralists by the existence of the clitoris in women: something





whose function is joy. If the Creator were quite so instrumentalist in "his" attitude to sexuality, these hints of prodigality and redundancy in the way the whole thing works might cause us to worry about whether "he" was, after all, in full rational control of it. But if God made us for joy . . .?

The odd thing is that this sense of meaning for sexuality beyond biological reproduction is the one foremost in the biblical use of sexual metaphors for God's relation to humanity. God as the husband of the land is a familiar enough trope, but Hosea's projection of the husband-and-wife story onto the history of Israel deliberately subverts the God-and-the-land clichés of Near Eastern cults: God is not the potent male sower of seed but the tormented lover, and the gift of the land's fertility is conditional upon the hurts of unfaithfulness and rejection being healed.

The imagery remains strongly patriarchal, not surprisingly, but its content and direction are surprising. Hosea is commanded to love his wife "as I, the LORD, love the Israelites" (Hos. 3:1, *NEB*) – persistently, without immediate return, exposing himself to humiliation. What seems to be the prophet's own discovery of a kind of sexual tragedy enables a startling and poignant reimagining of what it means for God to be united, not with a land alone, but with a people, themselves vulnerable and changeable. God is at the mercy of the perceptions of an uncontrolled partner.

John Boswell, in his Michael Harding Address, made a closely related observation: "Love in the Old Testament is too idealised in terms of sexual attraction (rather than procreation). Samuel's father says to his wife – who is sterile and heartbroken because she does not produce children – 'Am I not more to you than ten children?' " And he goes on to note that the same holds for the New Testament, which "is notably nonbiological in its emphasis."[7] Jesus and Paul equally discuss marriage without using procreation as a rational or functional justification. Paul's strong words in 1 Corinthians 7:4 about partners in marriage surrendering the individual "ownership" of their bodies carry a more remarkable revaluation of sexuality than anything else in the Christian scriptures. And the use of marital imagery for Christ and the church in Ephesians 5, for all its blatant assumption of male authority, still insists on the relational and personally creative element in the metaphor: "In loving his wife a man loves himself. For no one ever hated his own body" (5:28–9, *NEB*).

In other words, if we are looking for a sexual ethic that can be seriously informed by our Bible, there is a good deal to steer us away from assuming that reproductive sex is a solitary norm, however important and theologically significant it may be. When looking for a language that will be resourceful enough to speak of the complex and costly faithfulness between God and God's people, what several of the biblical writers turn to is sexuality understood very much in terms of the process of "entering the body's grace." If we are afraid of facing the reality of same-sex love because it compels us to think through

extraordinary experiment does seem to be "justified in its children," in two obvious ways. There is the great freedom of the celibate mystic in deploying the rhetoric of erotic love in speaking of God; and, even more important, there is that easy acceptance of the body, its needs and limitations, which we find in mature celibates like Teresa of Avila in her last years. Whatever the cost, this vocation stands as an essential part of the background to understanding the body's grace: paradoxical as it sounds, the celibate calling has, as one aspect of its role in the Christian community, the nourishing and enlarging of Christian sexuality.

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Same-sex love annoyingly poses the question of what the meaning of desire is – in itself, not considered as instrumental to some other process, such as the peopling of the world. We are brought up against the possibility not only of pain and humiliation without any clear payoff, but, just as worryingly, of nonfunctional joy – of joy, to put it less starkly, whose material "production" is an embodied person aware of grace. The question is the same as the one raised for some kinds of moralists by the existence of the clitoris in women: something





whose function is joy. If the Creator were quite so instrumentalist in "his" attitude to sexuality, these hints of prodigality and redundancy in the way the whole thing works might cause us to worry about whether "he" was, after all, in full rational control of it. But if God made us for joy . . .?

The odd thing is that this sense of meaning for sexuality beyond biological reproduction is the one foremost in the biblical use of sexual metaphors for God's relation to humanity. God as the husband of the land is a familiar enough trope, but Hosea's projection of the husband-and-wife story onto the history of Israel deliberately subverts the God-and-the-land clichés of Near Eastern cults: God is not the potent male sower of seed but the tormented lover, and the gift of the land's fertility is conditional upon the hurts of unfaithfulness and rejection being healed.

The imagery remains strongly patriarchal, not surprisingly, but its content and direction are surprising. Hosea is commanded to love his wife "as I, the LORD, love the Israelites" (Hos. 3:1, *NEB*) – persistently, without immediate return, exposing himself to humiliation. What seems to be the prophet's own discovery of a kind of sexual tragedy enables a startling and poignant reimagining of what it means for God to be united, not with a land alone, but with a people, themselves vulnerable and changeable. God is at the mercy of the perceptions of an uncontrolled partner.

John Boswell, in his Michael Harding Address, made a closely related observation: "Love in the Old Testament is too idealised in terms of sexual attraction (rather than procreation). Samuel's father says to his wife – who is sterile and heartbroken because she does not produce children – 'Am I not more to you than ten children?' " And he goes on to note that the same holds for the New Testament, which "is notably nonbiological in its emphasis."[7] Jesus and Paul equally discuss marriage without using procreation as a rational or functional justification. Paul's strong words in 1 Corinthians 7:4 about partners in marriage surrendering the individual "ownership" of their bodies carry a more remarkable revaluation of sexuality than anything else in the Christian scriptures. And the use of marital imagery for Christ and the church in Ephesians 5, for all its blatant assumption of male authority, still insists on the relational and personally creative element in the metaphor: "In loving his wife a man loves himself. For no one ever hated his own body" (5:28–9, *NEB*).

In other words, if we are looking for a sexual ethic that can be seriously informed by our Bible, there is a good deal to steer us away from assuming that reproductive sex is a solitary norm, however important and theologically significant it may be. When looking for a language that will be resourceful enough to speak of the complex and costly faithfulness between God and God's people, what several of the biblical writers turn to is sexuality understood very much in terms of the process of "entering the body's grace." If we are afraid of facing the reality of same-sex love because it compels us to think through

the processes of bodily desire and delight in their own right, perhaps we ought to be more cautious about appealing to scripture as legitimating only procreative heterosexuality.

In a church that accepts the legitimacy of contraception, the absolute condemnation of same-sex relations of intimacy must rely either on an abstract fundamentalist deployment of a number of very ambiguous biblical texts, or on a problematic and nonscriptural theory about natural complementarity, applied narrowly and crudely to physical differentiation without regard to psychological structures. I suspect that a fuller exploration of the sexual metaphors of the Bible will have more to teach us about a theology and ethics of sexual desire than will the flat citation of isolated texts; and I hope other theologians will find this worth following up more fully than I can do here.

A theology of the body's grace which can do justice to the experience of concrete sexual discovery, in all its pain and variety, is not, I believe, a marginal eccentricity in the doctrinal spectrum. It depends heavily on believing in a certain sort of God – the trinitarian Creator and Savior of the world – and it draws in a great many themes in the Christian understanding of humanity, helping us to a better critical grasp of the nature and the dangers of corporate human living.

It is surely time to give time to this, especially when so much public Christian comment on these matters is not only nontheological but positively antitheological. But for now let me close with some words from a non-Christian writer who has managed to say more about true theology than most so-called professionals like myself.

> It is perception above all which will free us from tragedy. Not the perception of illusion, or of a fantasy that would deny the power of fate and nature. But perception wedded to matter itself, a knowledge that comes to us from the sense of the body, a wisdom born of wholeness of mind and body come together in the heart. The heart dies in us. This is the self we have lost, the self we daily sacrifice.[8]

I know no better account of the body's grace, and of its precariousness.

## Notes

1 Paul Scott, *The Day of the Scorpion* (London: Heinemann, 1968), 450.
2 Ibid., 454.
3 Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 44–5. [Reprinted in this volume.]
4 Ibid., 47.
5 Ibid., 49–50.





6 Sebastian Moore, *The Inner Loneliness* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 62.
7 John Boswell, "Rediscovering Gay History" (London: Gay Christian Movement, 1982), 13.
8 Susan Griffin, *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge against Nature* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), 154.