

The Erotic life of God: Daring to Speak about Sex and Spirit all in One Breath!

Sex bedevils the Church. The erotic power of sexual expression seems to taunt the dignity of religion through controversies about gender, sexual preference, the breaking of pastoral boundaries, and the generally sad reminiscence about the decline of 'family' values. From the prospect of gay Bishops to paedophilia, news reports each day deal with issues that arise from an institution in crisis trying to rise above this pre-occupation with 'fleshly' things. For some this is understood as a distraction from the real gospel or at worst the work of the devil. In its embarrassed discomfort, the Church gives the impression that it would like to quarantine all passion within ordered and docile bodies, encouraging them to sleep soundly and inattentive to their own flesh.

Each of these issues, of course, deserves careful attention as it involves looking at the Christian tradition and the necessary formation of ethics and values in the face of new situations. But underlying these tasks is, I think, the familiar smell of fear. A general anxiety or discomfort about bodiliness is evidence, perhaps, for a more profound and literal fear of infection or disease. Or put another way, is there an attitude present that would see the purity of faith at risk when it lives and breathes in and through bodies?

Such a discomfort points to the larger symptom of a general fear of the body, of our very creatureliness, that has long been part of the western tradition. Here I remember with intense fervour the great St Servitus who spent most of his medieval life atop a reasonably tall pole. In this somewhat precarious position for continual prayer, his body gradually wasted away. This act of pious enthusiasm was pursued of course for the greater glory of God. As the ropes that held him in place slowly tore into and disfigured his body he would gently pull out the worms that were eating his decayed flesh in a respectful act of love for God's creatures.

This it seems, is an example of unnecessary suffering and is not a saint, I would suggest, that should be emulated. This story is, however, strangely familiar when acts of body denial continue or are more insidiously visited on those who are different in matters of physical reference such as gender or race. Here the fear of difference leads to actions that seek to regulate or control others, which only serves to continue the violent and heretical actions of Servitus!

Spiritual hierarchies tend to leave the body down the scale. Neoplatonic philosophy, which still spawns its way through the Churches' teaching, devalues the flesh and its diversity. Here the notion of a pure dis-embodied spiritual state is favoured. This works to deny one's physicality, which of course includes notions of pleasure and any other related source of temptation. Such attitudes have served to regulate the role of women, and other minority groups who are created by their difference through race, gender or

'sexual deviance'. Modern witch-hunts, such as acts of vilification and hatred, are continuing evidence that people seek to repress or reject fundamental parts of their own human experience and project it on to others as a convenient form of scape-goating.

Bodies, and the desire for pleasure will however still remain. Ecstasy cannot be ultimately controlled or at least is not managed well by institutions. Such imagined desire is often visited on marginal groups who are invested with powers that need to be managed or controlled through political and physical surveillance. I remember speaking to a woman who was the first woman elected to her Parish's vestry prayer roster, a role that required her to pray with the minister for a minute or so before the service. On these occasions for fear of impropriety he would demand the attendance of another male. A man in this role, it could be assumed, would pray while a woman was primarily a sign of sexual energy.

While not being an expected activity in the vestry, moments of ecstasy are however, fundamental to renewing one's presence in the world. Ecstasy itself is the breath of wonder, the delight of being alive that belongs to the whole of human life in all its fullness. Ecstasy is the means through which our erotic energy finds its breath and life in us and is a necessary and joyous part of being human. Rather than requiring surveillance or management it calls for a process of 'living with' that engenders life giving behaviours rather than repression, guilt or suffering. Part of any holistic spiritual practice is the ability to live and breathe as an erotically energised person that in turn will illuminate the whole gamut of our expressive and embodied lives.

In contrast, therefore, to any attitude of 'disease' I would hold that it is possible to talk about an embodied spirituality that encompasses the delight and unbounded joy of being an erotically alive person. This is where lived experience is best brought into dialogue with the theology of the Christian life. This where we can explore the affirmations of the incarnation of Christ, the word of God, made flesh. This connection helps to find a container that sustains the ongoing energy of creative hope. In some ways this is simply living with the power of the erotic as an energy that seeks connection, passion and unitive focus.

True erotic energy is found wherever pleasure considers the other and not just the self. The commodification of sexual pleasure in our society is largely auto-erotic as it is contains desire, limits vulnerability and gives the false premise that the individual is both a powerful creator and fulfiller of their own fantasies. Erotic energy, in contrast, will look to the other to create an environment of both risk and trust where mutuality and common pleasure is created. This leaves the individuals both empowered in their own grounded identity as well as open and responsive to the other.

Erotic energy is not enhanced through activities of dominance, power or brittle isolation. This becomes the promise that feeds many of the scenarios used by the media that appeal to our desire for sexual expression. This underlies many video games, for example, that

play with sexual stereotypes and that employ erotic power allusions. Some sorts of virtual reality games will train us to believe they we can pleasure ourselves. The essential disappointment of such promises will leave us anxious and isolated especially if as a young person this is our training for intimacy and attachment.

Every community that works towards health needs the energy of the erotic to assert the power needed to change, to engender hope and create justice. Community is the balance of mutual pleasuring for the common good. It is an economy of grace and true love, which is not achieved through denial and repression. Communities need to celebrate the deep desire for life and ecstatic hope that shivers through any great life lived to its fullest capacity.

An idea that re-occurs in recent writings on the interface between science and theology is the essential 'interconnectedness' of all things. This is perhaps another way of talking about the ethics of love and the generative power of compassion. The erotic lies at the heart of our protest in the face of injustice, as we yearn for a re-ordering of power based on mutuality and love in creation. My understanding of the erotic here is that it belongs as an energy contributing to the fullness of life in all its personal, social, and political realities. It is not a private indulgence or meagre measure of love and connection.

The erotic belongs to the rhythm of bodies in worship, prayer, service and action. It is truly not a new thing but a thing so close that it is often overlooked. Perhaps we would best be served by pointing to the sorts of practices that already mediate to us the ecstatic and generative aspects of our existence. It is here we will celebrate our bodies' participation in the greater rhythms of life and garner the pleasure and delight of our own existence.

Practices that invite a whole body response are crucial to us overcoming any inherited idea of a split or war between flesh and spirit or between god given capacities and our bodily existence. The incarnation invites us to experience our being as one, and not as a division into a hierarchy of parts. Massage for some - walking for others, physical exertion and noticing the effect on our minds - all contributes to our own sense of self. Physicality is basic to our knowledge of ourselves as graced beings that are able to enjoy God's creation. The sensual rhythm of worship, the passing of the peace, the taste and smell of time are remembered through the body as grace. Prayer while walking, worship that moves through space, praying with our senses - all invite an extended range of bodily responses and require an open response to change and surprise.

One vocational response that has called on my awareness of the erotic has been the urge to get involved in issues of social justice. This is particularly the case when I am confronted by knowledge about the visceral and bodily situations of people who suffer. I remember in the first year of my professional life as a clergyperson returning in my best new suit from an important meeting down the main street of the town. There in the

middle of the foot path lay the prone form of Bill, a warm and generous person who usually lived just outside my front door, no doubt out of some need for safety on this dangerous inner urban street. Bill, usually a jovial 'drunk', now lay in a dark stupor and was being precariously stepped over by the lunchtime crowd.

I remember swaying in the doorway of my indecision and then recoiling at the smear of his spit on my cleanly brushed lapels, the vomit wiping across my best white shirt, the stench of his pants against my hands and my groin as I lifted him across the traffic to the safety of the park where he could sleep off his excess. All the time I screamed silently as a very large numbers of eyes followed me through this very physical set of actions. It was a moment of trading in one self image based on detached control to another that involved getting my hands dirty and letting myself be affected, that is, being vulnerable and affected, getting angry and wanting change borne out of some sort of desire in love. It began with my body and Bill's body being in connection and was the beginning of my work in inner city housing and the provision of hospitality for the marginalised.

With such small acts of desire for justice God is pleased. Pleasure is given to God and all creation when we work towards just actions and compassionate acts. As we tend the world that we are so inextricably part of then we also nurture the ground we walk on, the air we breathe and the water we drink. Our lives and their desires become part of the cycle of mutual pleasure that necessarily sustains the fabric of our own lives. When we pleasure the creation in this way, then we pleasure God.

Rather than repress the erotic, I would like to think that faith, and the life of faith communities, could be a place where we funnel our creative capacities to their fullest expression, becoming co-creators with God of a new creation for all beings irrespective of their own personal allegiances. For me this is not simply about correct belief and behaviour but being aware of my own connection to the rhythms of creation.

As a person trained to be an artist, in particular, it is about making present through visible means my own search for humanity. I am more fully erotic when I have connected that energy to my whole self as creator. With this, my life finds its truer meaning and purpose. It is with this intention I dare to hope, that God is well pleased in a full and passionate manner.

God our lover,
In whose reaching out in desire, is our life and breath.
Grant that we may pleasure your creation
With gifts of vulnerable passion,
That we with all your creation,
May declare your praise in our bodies
Naming your image in our fragile earthiness
And celebrating your consummation among us.

Word made flesh. Amen.

Rod Pattenden is Chaplain at the Macquarie University Sydney, for the Uniting Church. He is also Director of the Institute for Theology and the Arts and his spiritual practices include dancing, cooking and drinking fine wine (without excess).