

*Editorial*

## **SEX AND RELIGION**

### **Contemporary Responses**

The fact that human societies from the beginning had a normative approach to everything related to sex and sexuality is indisputable, whether its source was religion or state, or the ‘private’ conscience of an individual. It is also a fact that most of it has been evolving and changing over time. Although there had been continued and consistent attempts on the part of the libertines to ridicule and challenge the norms that were in place, they have not yet succeeded in overthrowing normative approaches to sexuality altogether, which, I think, is the case also with the most ‘liberated’ crusades of free sex. Yet, interestingly, we must also be open enough to admit the fact that despite all these norms, average human sexual behaviour (if we could go by the ‘scientifically’ conducted survey results that are made available to us in our present times) very seldom fits into the normative moulds, especially when it comes to the private lives of many individuals. It is also true that moral or legal norms with regard to sexual behaviour, to some extent, have tended to inflict people with a burdensome conscience, either of sin or of guilt, which is said to have resulted in enslaving them than ultimately facilitating a liberating experience that both religion and state are expected to provide. Then, does it amount to saying that there is no point in having moral norms with regard to the sexual behaviour of human individuals and societies? In this context, it is important to ask the simple question, why should there be norms – moral and/or legal – in the sphere of human sexual behaviour?

Sex and sexuality are inherent dimensions of human existence; in the process of becoming a human person and from the point of view of evaluating personality development, responses to one’s own sex and sexuality are fundamentally important. Apart from considering sexuality as a psychosomatic endowment and a biological and emotional need, in the course of time, it has also assumed social, cultural, and religious dimensions. Sex was never a private affair and, therefore, the issues related to it should be deliberated upon from various angles so as to facilitate a healthy and wholesome approach to sex and sexuality, both individually and collectively.

The word ‘sex’ comes from the Latin expression, ‘*sexus*’, which is originally derived from the verb *secare* and means to separate or to divide.

Practically speaking, the word ‘sex’ and its extensive use have divided the whole human race (for that matter almost the entire animal kingdom) into two distinct groups of male and female. Although ‘sex’ divides the humanity into two groups,<sup>1</sup> a religious perspective shall approach it as a natural and fundamental aspect of human existence,<sup>2</sup> which is the most potent of all energies to enable human beings in effecting integration, unity, and oneness among themselves and with other beings, including God.

Sex had been an object of unflinching interest both from the laymen’s and scholars’ perspectives. Popular as well as scholarly opinions and literature abound in the area of sex and sexuality. Due to its importance, sex has also attracted a lot of concurrent researches, which have contributed a great deal in understanding various intricacies involved in it. It is true that availability of scientific information gradually transforms public opinion and value consciousness. Yet, the insistence that our value consciousness should always depend exclusively upon the available scientific information, especially to the total disregard of religious and moral wisdom, to my mind, tends to be a wayward approach,<sup>3</sup> especially when it comes to our understanding of and response to sex and sexuality.

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<sup>1</sup>From a scientific point of view, the physical features that contribute to the distinction of a human being into male and female include the following seven factors: (1) chromosomal sex, (2) gonadal sex, (3) hormonal sex, (4) internal accessory reproductive structures, (5) external sex organs, (6) sex of assignment and rearing, and (7) sexual self-identification.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, 60, 1, ad 3. Caution must be exercised in understanding sex as the most fundamental life force of a human being, especially as it has connotations of the Freudian psychoanalytic theory. Disassociating with the general trend of the psychoanalytic approach to sex in which sexuality is read into every human behaviour, the general trend today is to assume that sexuality is a vital energy fundamental to human existence and may positively or negatively affect a human being depending upon the approach that one (along with the others) adopts to it. Sex, though fundamental, unlike the Freudians have assumed it, shall not be seen as *the* underlying motive of every human activity.

<sup>3</sup>While science gives us a lead in understanding various dimensions of reality, hitherto unknown and unexplored, it would be foolish to think that science is completely objective and neutral. Every science, and for that matter every scientist, has a subjective point of view, and moves ahead in his/her scientific researches basing on that point of view. It is true that by and large scientists are bound to change

In our contemporary society, it is sad to observe that one of the most sublime dimensions of human existence, sex, has been manipulated to serve the interests of the market economy. Without any exaggeration it could be said that sex-related industry is one of the most thriving throughout the human history, which does not seem to have had any adverse effect due to the financial crisis that has shook the lives people all over the world.<sup>4</sup> Sexual fulfilment understood as a human need does not happen without a properly cultured interpersonal matrix, which is very hard to come by if everything goes by the market dynamics oriented to profit aggrandizement. Due to this unique nature of attaining sexual fulfilment in human beings, sexual 'want' had been an issue that every human being encountered at one moment or the other in his or her life. As its fulfilment or attainment fundamentally required formation of other-respecting healthy attitudes, the other's life enhancing loving and caring practices, and the self- and the other-assuring commitment, cultivation of which is not very easy in a world that is thrust upon by egoistic perspectives and values, people encounter difficulties in their sexual life, affecting the other areas of life as well. It is the nature of sex that the more the denial of its fulfilment, the greater the craving for it, unless there are higher and nobler causes or motivations that animate the mind and soul of the person concerned.

It is natural that there are many men and women who yearn for sexual fulfilment, although they may not easily realize it in their given circumstances. Identifying this delicate situation triggered the ingenuity of the market economy. Where sexual fulfilment remains a very powerful need, which is not easy to come by – especially in the absence of healthy or wholesome humane attitudes, such as loving dispositions, caring

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their points of view depending on the results or findings, though mostly it remains merely a theoretical aspiration or ideal.

<sup>4</sup>A recent issue of *U.S. News & World Report* was devoted to the astounding rise of the sex business in America. It said: "Last year Americans spent more than \$8 billion on hardcore videos, live sex acts, adult cable programming, sexual devices, computer porn and sex magazines – an amount much larger than Hollywood's domestic box office receipts and larger than all the revenues generated by rock and country music albums. Americans now spend more money at strip clubs than at Broadway, Off-Broadway, regional and non-profit theatres, at the opera, the ballet, and jazz and classical music performances – combined." "From the Congressional Record, November 8, 1997." <http://groups.csail.mit.edu/mac/classes/6.805/articles/cda/coats-nov-97.txt> (January 2009).

practices, and self- and other-assuring commitment – selling sex-related pleasure and sex-clad pseudo-fulfilment have assumed larger market proportions. For example, it is common knowledge that prostitution is as old as human social existence; despite legal and moral repression of such practices all through the civilized era, the market related to sex and sexuality continues to thrive. In fact, with the arrival of modern communication media and information technology, operation of ‘sex market’ has assumed greater proportions, whereby marketing agencies of sex related services have begun to enjoy a thriving global client-base. The spurt of internet-based pornography, for example, has made the availability of sexual ‘pleasures’ easy and cheap all over the world.

The question, however, that we need to ask ourselves is whether all these market techniques to amass profit by tapping into one of the intense human needs is justifiable? Does marketing of sex-related ‘pleasures’ really enable human persons to attain sexual fulfilment on its own? Is sexuality something that could be restricted to a mere mechanical exercise of human sexual organs? Human sexuality, beyond its mere physical dimensions both in terms of genital pleasures and reproductive aspects, is a very subtle and delicate human existential power capable of effecting mutually enhancing human relationships, primarily through the intense but lifelong commitment and love that two individuals of opposite sex could intentionally establish and maintain. The most interesting aspect of it is that such a relationship functions as the matrix where experience of love would contribute to the commitment between the partners, and their mutual commitment would enhance the experience of love on an ongoing basis.

The market, in association with all its subtle collaborators (media being a key ally), is so strong that imparting any value consciousness in the society as to the lasting sexual commitment and mutually enhancing love between two persons of opposite sex is being consistently and deliberately ridiculed and presented as repressive of the human spirit. Unfortunately, an average person pulled and pushed by the market forces does not realize the fact that their apparent ‘concern and love’ for the ‘good’ of the public interests, especially in matters pertaining to sexuality, do not come from their love for the good of individuals or the common good; instead it is oriented only to the good of those who plan and execute business strategies to bring larger proportions of profit. As the media accompanies most of such moves – the media too thrives on sensitising human needs and makes better profit when it manipulates those

fundamental human wants – it bombards the society with information flow so as to effect a growing consciousness among the larger public that would crave for more and more sexual fantasies and fulfilment, which most of the normal human interpersonal relationship or family relationship cannot, but only the depersonalized sex industry can supply. This is so, especially because the sex industry blows the sexual needs and fantasies of human beings out of proportion and present them as absolutely impossible to be realized in any lasting relationship between two human beings of opposite sex; then, the market alternative would sound to be the only possible avenue for sexual fulfilment, if one should go by the sexual fantasies painted by the media and market.

There is a subtle and alarming move that the media and the market together make in containing any initiative based on value consciousness. Market forces move hand in glove to ridicule agencies such as religion, educational institutions, etc., which try to instil a value consciousness among the youngsters and the larger public. I am ready to concede to the fact that there had been negative excesses on the part of various religions in approaching matters pertaining to sex and sexuality. That does not, however, mean that every direction given by religions shall be looked down upon as if they are all unbecoming for human existence. Indeed, many an injunction of various religions had been capable of instilling value consciousness in many peoples over different generations, and they have been capable of retaining this precious and vital human energy oriented for human welfare and enhancement. What happens in the present era is the ongoing crusade of the media and market against religious wisdom so much so that any one who would lean towards religious perspectives is branded to be old-fashioned, traditional, and out of touch with contemporary reality. What is apparently real for the media is what they themselves project as the real. Seldom do we realize that the world the media paints is born out of their fantasies, which would ultimately enhance their private welfare through the aggrandizement of profit, which ultimately fails to contribute to the lasting welfare of the human race, especially in their dealings with issues of sex and sexuality.

Many a time, people make baseless allegations against various religions with blanket statements like "every censorship effort and every attempt at sexual repression still comes from religion" or "religion's interest in defining sex in terms of values is nothing less than raw assertion of power over the very meaning of humanity." On another extreme, some

others are all praise for the Asian religions in terms of offering very positive and open attitude towards matters related to sex. To my mind, both these positions are wrong, as there are, on the one hand, many in the West, who have been capable of inculcating a positive attitude towards human sexuality and, on the other, many in the East who continue to harbour in the third millennium very negative and life- and sexuality-negating attitudes, scriptural writings, and practices, to say the least. What we must do today is neither to blame nor to praise the past religious injunctions and traditional practices in terms of their attitudes towards human sexuality, instead we must approach the issue of human sexuality in a holistic manner, which would be capable of enhancing our human existence, individually and collectively. Of course, I firmly believe that religious wisdom has a lot of good to offer in this regard. So, the modern approach, as far as I would advocate, should consist of a balanced blend of our contemporary scientific information regarding human anatomy and sexual responses, cultural evolution, and religious wisdom, so that human response with regard to sexuality will not be merely physiological or psychological, but characteristically 'human'.

An exclusively sexological or psychological approach to sex and sexuality needs to be abandoned (as they mostly tend to limit their purview on to the naturalistic, somatic, and sensualistic interpretation of human sexuality, many a time restricting it to mere eroticism); as they are so deep-seated in the human being, we need to cultivate an existential and integral approach so as to positively redeem sex and sexuality from the negative approaches that abound in human history,<sup>5</sup> whether their sources could be traced to religious or political decrees.

To a great extent, it is true that anti-sexuality attitudes perpetuated by religious authorities have inflicted untold human misery, especially on women. In some extreme cases of fundamentalist reading of the scriptures, religious authorities have been instrumental in letting the scriptural taboos function as guilt-vending machines for the faithful, leading them to a total denial of normal and natural sexual behaviour. If such instances were to occur in the contemporary era, then they create toxic influence in the minds of the faithful, apparently with scriptural foundation, which

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<sup>5</sup>For more information on how sex and sexuality were approached by human beings through the ages, see Reay Tannahill, *Sex in History*, New York: Stein & Day, 1980.

ultimately produces 'unholy' effect on them, whom I believe can attain holiness only in being and becoming 'human' in every sense.

The restrictions with regard to sex, as maintained by religions such as Catholicism, are not to restrict everyone for the sake of restricting, as some writers tend to make us believe. For example, Bertrand Russell, a noted British philosopher, has declared that a "morbid and unnatural" attitude toward sex is "the worst feature of the Christian religion." Further, the allegation that most of the traditional religions have harboured a 'loathing for the body' is also not totally true. Indeed, there have been negative approaches, unbecoming practices, brutal denials, etc., initiated by religious authorities. However, I hold that it had mostly to do with the upbringing and attitudes of the individuals in question and the social mores in which they were groomed: they were the children of their times. It is unfortunate that in certain cases they have crept into the mainstream thinking of these religions and the wider societies. Yet, a complete rejection of religious wisdom when it comes to human body, especially in our judgement on matters pertaining to sex and sexuality, is a dangerous and short-sighted approach. As the religious scriptures, in most cases, have resulted from a 'sedimenting' effect of various revolutionary and life-animating forces, movements, and peoples over a period of time (and most of the time, these going far beyond the mores of the given era), they shall be approached as signposts that the humanity can access so that better and holistic lives can be designed. Of course, that is not to suggest that we should be slaves to the content of religious scriptures and traditions; instead, we should be capable of imbibing the best from these scriptures, the lore of divinely inspired human wisdom, in our effort to design novel attitudes and perspectives, new forms and styles of life in the twenty-first century.

The whole series of lectures on the theology of body given by Pope John Paul II sends out very positive signals as to the creative way of looking at human being, especially body and sexuality.<sup>6</sup> It presents not a tone of denying or condemning human body, sexuality, and love, as it is wrongly alleged of the Catholic Church, but of recognizing, appreciating, and integrating the body as well as masculinity or femininity into the whole person. Of course, this integration that Christianity has visualized,

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<sup>6</sup>John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997.

as John Paul II has presented it, does not make room for licentiousness, but a very careful exercise of human freedom with higher goals which necessarily presupposes a value-imbued consciousness that would facilitate orientating every human endowment, including sexuality, to the final goal of attaining wholesome human existence beyond the limiting terrains of this temporal world. This needs integrating eros with ethos, or exercise of sexuality in tune with an ethical consciousness so that eros will not carry away the whole person, rather would be integrated into the whole person's ultimate goals, making human existence wholesome.<sup>7</sup> In one of his addresses, John Paul II comments on the creation of man and woman and their mutual complementarity:

In the mystery of creation, the woman was “given” to the man. On his part, in receiving her as a gift in the full truth of her person and femininity, man thereby enriches her. At the same time, he too is enriched in this mutual relationship. The man is enriched not only through her, who gives him her own person and femininity, but also through the gift of himself. The man's giving of himself, in response to that of the woman, enriches himself. It manifests the specific essence of his masculinity which, through the reality of the body and of sex, reaches the deep recesses of the “possession of self.”<sup>8</sup>

Thus, from a Christian point of view, it is in the mutual interpenetration of two persons – man and woman – through giving and accepting of their selves, which existentially includes their masculinity and femininity, that they find the ultimate expression of bringing together eros and ethos in themselves; in fact, such a blending of selves ultimately leads to the Christic self-giving love (agape), to the communion of these two persons, and through that into the communion of all.

Moral norms in the sphere of sex and sexuality enable human beings to regulate the exercise of their sexual instinct, powers, and aspirations. As we have maintained that sexuality is one of the fundamental human dimensions, its exercise must be attuned to the attainment of the welfare of individual human beings as well as the larger society. Human history

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<sup>7</sup>Even in Plato's understanding, eros (though fundamentally egocentric) enables a human being to bridge the wedge between the world of senses and the world of ideas; it is such a powerful intermediary power that human beings are endowed with, an exercise of which leads to the attainment of the very human destiny (See *Symposio* 203, 211; *Repubblica* 514).

<sup>8</sup>John Paul II, “Man and Woman: A Mutual Gift for Each Other,” *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), February 11, 1980, 1.



attests to the need of maintaining norms in the sphere of sexual exercises. Human life – individually and collectively – is in need of normative regulation, as these norms are derived or designed by employing human reason, understanding of human nature, and the aspirations as to what human beings have to finally realize. Reason, along with other human abilities, enables human societies to derive norms that would set the goals of the society as well as the tone of their social intercourse. Of course, identifying a set of norms in the arena of sexuality would include commandments and prohibitions. Instead of turning away from the existing commandments and prohibitions as unnecessary boundaries scrupulously imposed in bygone ages by irrelevant authorities, we need to identify the values and norms that have been found to be lasting in the human sojourn over the millennia. Although humanity has been evolving over the years, its sustenance as an integrally knit society that surges ahead to ever greater levels of existence has been facilitated and animated by the value consciousness that human beings have been abiding by.

The most essential aspect that needs reemphasis in our contemporary times, I think, is the recognition of the person in whom sexuality is identified. The sexual potential that we discuss here, fundamental as it is, is found not in any other entity, but in a human person. Any exercise of this potential, therefore, presupposes that it would not hamper or belittle the person. Moreover, sexuality being so integral to the individual person, it shall not be approached in a casual manner, as it would take away the delicacies and sacredness associated with it.

The intimate and exclusive encounter that facilitates deeper and lasting sexual relationship among couples has to be insisted upon in an attempt to reaffirm and redeem the person who is involved in living his or her sexuality. The exercise of sexuality is one of the avenues of self-gift to the other. When two persons of the opposite sex exercise this self-gifting, they complement and complete human wholeness. As the intimate dimension of the person is being gifted to another person, what is to be exchanged upon is another person, ultimately facilitating the total self-gift of two individuals. As this gifting of the person is so total that there cannot be any other party involved in this relationship, i.e., it ultimately tends to be an exclusive relationship within which sexual self-gifting can be finally realized. This sets the stage for an ongoing and mutually enhancing encounter between two persons of opposite sex on a permanent basis.

In such a mutually enhancing relationship of a lasting nature, a mere mechanistic and physical understanding of sexuality should be avoided. As sexuality is a human potential, like any other human dimension, it should be approached in a humane manner. The unbridled exercise of sexual potential that the contemporary media seem to make us believe to be universal and necessary for human flourishing and self-fulfilment ultimately reduces human persons into mere vending machines of sexual pleasure. This is a degenerating perspective on humanity. A human person is more than his or her sexuality. It is in the integral or wholesome exercise of his or her powers, including sexuality that one continues to remain a human person. Therefore, both the neglect and the over-emphasis of sexuality need to be checked.

Although there is resistance towards religion, which is being consistently perpetuated by some media agencies to serve their own vested interests, there is no excuse for religions and religious authorities in shying away from their responsibilities. A genuine religion that serves to elevate human existence to the higher realms of the divine has a fundamental responsibility to provide direction to its members with regard to their life perspectives and actions. As sound directions in matters of sex are hard to come by these days, even the youngsters, who are said to be drifting away from religious structures, look forward to religious authorities for proper and timely interventions as to how they should proceed and what are the proper responses expected of a religious believer, especially when it comes to matters of sex. So, instead of thinking that any pronouncement on sex and sexuality would be branded prudish, religious authorities have a very serious obligation to provide ongoing guidance to believers (as well as to the nonbelievers in an indirect manner) to attain human wholeness through the proper exercise of their sexuality.

Religious leaders also have to learn to respond to human situations better. Many a time their responses to anything connected to sex drifts to unwholesome extremes, while they conveniently bypass many other issues that need better attention and uncompromising condemnation.<sup>9</sup> Though a bit too sarcastic, the following verse from a popular song puts it straight

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<sup>9</sup>The Victorian Age, which had been too sensitive to any discussion on the sexuality of a child (as if the child was almost a-sexual in its existence till it became an adult) and almost prohibited anything related to it to be even spoken in public at the pretext of serving the good of the children and saving them from the ill-effects of sexuality, surprisingly, does not seem to have taken note of many children who were kept as slaves and had been employed in fields as well as in coal mines.

across: "Bullets fly like popcorn on the screen, recommended wholesome, nice and clean. Making love's the thing that can't be seen. Why?" Of course, I am not recommending the media's approach in making light of sexuality as a welcome move; there need to be restrictions in this regard so that better value consciousness and decorum could be maintained in our society, and children, especially, could be protected from unwarranted overdose of sexuality in their daily lives. The point, however, is just that those who raise alarm over the marketing of sexuality by the media, as it is unhealthy for our society as a whole, must be all the more vigilant and outspoken regarding the ill-effects of many other violence-boosting and life-negating initiatives of the media at the same time.

If children are provided with proper sex education, they would gradually not only learn to have the exercise of their sexual powers, but would be enabled to involve in healthy, wholesome sexual communication, that would enhance their individual as well as social consciousness and relationships. If trained positively and properly and in time, both male and female members of our society would be responsibly sensitive to the needs of others, instead of being self-centred. Moreover, every religion has a responsibility to help its members learn methods of proper and value-ridden sexual communication, so that their sexual abilities could be exercised for the good of the human society, and consciously avoid the ills that may emerge from an exercise that may be adjudged to be unwholesome. Parents, teachers, and state and religious authorities have to exercise their responsibility in providing basic information about sex and sexuality, which would gradually enable them to develop wholesome and proper response to their own sexuality. There is no excuse to those who shy away from this responsibility. It is possible, and it happens even today, that due to their own problematic upbringing or personality conflicts some parents, teachers, etc., would feel not at ease to deal with issues related to sex and sexuality. Although this is natural, political as well as religious authorities must design ways and means to tackle this complex situation so that the future generations of humanity could be enabled to acquire better perspectives and practices with regard to sexuality.

Persistent resistance that we encounter in matters pertaining to sexuality when it comes to its instruction could be due to the negative approach that has been adopted, both by religious and secular instructors. It is universal to develop an aversion to increasing amount of constraints

being enforced upon by any leadership; even if they be tolerated at one point, it is bound to be resisted upon as human ingenuity and freedom always look for open space of the human spirit to grow and flourish. Instead of bombarding youngsters with a list of dos and don'ts, our age needs to design a plan of sex education that would enable them to understand their own sexuality, know the historical, cultural, and religious evolutions as to the exercise of sexual power in the development of humankind, its potential in enabling a person to attain his/her full human potential, the necessity of value consciousness in being and becoming human, which is equally applicable in matters pertaining to sexuality, etc.

One important lesson that the young members of our society need to learn is complete sexual equality. For, genuine love is possible only between two equals. More than an ideal, it is the need of our contemporary human society. The sexual liberation that has swept the western society has contributed a lot to this effect; the feminist movements, despite some of their negative and equality-denying approaches, also have been powerful in bringing to focus the necessity of sexual equality in our societies. The theory of “natural inferiority of women” needs to be approached as a badly intended myth – from political and religious spheres – which is in need of a total rejection and corrective action. Indeed, our contemporary society continues to reap the bad effects of such a position, which had been instrumental in segregating at least one half of the whole human population, and denying those members their rightful place and justice in society. Both men and women need to transcend their short-sightedness and overcome their unfounded fears with regard to any *pre-ordained* status of any particular group. That is again a myth, totally baseless as far as human beings are concerned.

In this context, it is very important that a holistic curriculum is introduced into the school and university programmes that would make room for understanding the nature of creation, place of human beings, and the necessity of emerging a society where both men and women would be treated on par. Of course, this general frame needs to be translated into the context of every society or nation. It is at the same time important that these students are enabled to see through some of the constraining and equality-denying ontological viewpoints that are perpetuated either by political or religious authorities, whether it is in the form of sacred religious scriptures or secular political constitutions. When it comes to constraining the human spirit, both of them have had adopted, at one time or another, more or less the same strategies, which shall be resisted upon

and overcome if they denigrate human spirit and its wholesome flourishing. Often, it would be necessary that we approach these issues with an open mind, a mind of a sincere seeker. Instead of being shocked and withdrawn every time some new research findings on sex-related issues challenge our conventional wisdom or tend to break certain taboos, we shall approach the scientific explorations as opportunities for understanding the dynamics of human sexuality better, so that every element of this completely human dimension could be attuned to the holistic growth of human persons and societies.

Often, sex can be a source of intense human conflict; interestingly, the same sex has also the potential to turn out to be a source of intense human communion. It depends on the attitude or approaches that individuals and societies have entertained with regard to sex and sexuality that would ultimately determine whether it turns out to be a source of conflict or communion. A contemporary perspective on sex would call for initiating every approach to make it wholesome, so that an inherent potency of human person could be a source of strength and appreciation. Sexuality, therefore, needs to be approached from the perspective of a creative, wholesome, and interpersonal context, where the sublime human nature, which is inherently sexual and interpersonal in character, can be integrally enhanced for the good of the individual person concerned as well as for the good of the whole creation.

It is this realization that our society is in need of designing more constructive and life-enhancing approaches to sex and sexuality that has prompted *Journal of Dharma* to dedicate this issue for a detailed discussion on "Sex and Religion: Contemporary Responses." Six scholars dwell upon the positive dimensions of sex vis-à-vis religion (some of them critiquing certain negative trends prevalent in understanding even religious scriptures), and affirm that religious perspectives on sex, if approached properly, would pave the way for a creative response to life itself.

Approaching sexuality from a positive Christian perspective, Paulachan Kochappilly, in his article, "Sexuality as Invitation to Intimacy and Integration," presents it as an invitation to intimacy and integration. According to him, "sexuality is an invitation to bonding and to stay in bond. It is an invitation to enter into relationship. It helps foster relationships. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of love. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of life. It is an invitation to cultivate a culture of care." Moreover, marriage is presented as the only context of

sexual love and life, which is sacramental as well as salvific for Christians, ultimately transforming lovemaking into a life-giving, unitive, and procreative act at the same time.

In another article, “Spirituality of Sex,” by Kurian Perumpallikunnel, we come across with another avenue of approaching sex from a contemporary religious point of view. Countering the allegation that sex is physical and bodily, this article unveils the greater spiritual powers that can be unleashed through self-disciplining and spiritual motivation. It is not mere attainment of physical pleasure that enhances a human person, but his attainment of higher levels of spiritual consciousness. By unveiling the intricate dimensions of bridal mysticism, the author concludes that instead of “condemning sexuality as evil or sinful,” the mystics “incorporated it into their practices, not physically but symbolically,” leading to the establishment of bridal love that is “gentle, romantic, self-sacrificing, total, confident, trustful, caring, all leading to a lifelong deliberate course of action that begets peace, joy, and celebration.”

Vatsyayana’s *Kāmasūtra*, which is reduced to the status of a mere sex manual or book on eroticism in the contemporary world, is analyzed by Shaji George Kochuthara in his article, “*Kāma* without Dharma? Understanding the Ethics of Pleasure in *Kāmasūtra*.” According to the author, “*Kāmasūtra* is a systematic study of the emotional and sensual nature of human impulses and of man-woman relationship.” He undertakes an analysis of the worldview that is behind this work and finds that the intent of this work is to provide a positive and balanced approach to sex and sexuality (along with other *Puru•ārthas*), and to emphasize the value in enhancing human life as well as social existence.

Asghar Ali Engineer, a contemporary interpreter of Islamic sources, presents “A Liberative Approach to Issues of Muslim Women in India.” Posing challenges to some interpretations offered by official interpreters of Islam, Engineer tries to build up a new approach, which is fundamentally based on the Qur’an that would set the stage to liberate women, who suffer for centuries under the repressions apparently attributed to the Islamic tradition. His prophetic voice urges his co-religionists to pursue self-criticism and reform of life vision and practices in tune with “the fundamental values and vision of life enshrined in the Qur’an” and, thus, “to empower Muslim women, to reduce rate of childbirth, to usher in religious and social reforms, there is a great need to improve general economic condition which, in turn, will improve educational status of

Muslim women and that, in turn, will bring in greater awareness for change."

"Sexual Dilemmas and Moral Reasoning: An Approach to Girls' Sexuality and Sexual Pleasure," by Vimala Chenginimattam, taking cue from the positive teachings of Pope John Paul II on the theology of the body, maintains that the contemporary crises in the arena of sexuality call for reclaiming of "the sacred ground of human sexuality." Situating her discussion in the problems that girls encounter in their sexual development and self-expression, which is curtailed by cultural, social, and religious taboos, and locating some of the answers provided by contemporary feminist authors, like Carol Gilligan, Vimala affirms that there is a need for "an acknowledgement of girls' *embodied sexual feelings*." Identifying the necessity of moral orientation in sexual education, the article calls for "a change in our worldview, especially pertaining to the world of girls and women, which highlights their true feelings, knowledge, and experience."

Finally, in a reflective article, "An Epistle of St. Paul on Sex: A Pauline Response to Issues of Sex in Contemporary Society," by Benny Nalkara, offers a modern Christian theological response to the contemporary questions pertaining to sexuality. The author, juxtaposing himself in the place of St. Paul, whose epistles have been accused of lacking a balanced view on matters pertaining to sex, offers an explanation of Pauline position on sex, clarifies certain confusions that have crept into the modern understanding of his writings, and tries to offer a constructive Pauline perspective in approaching the problems in the area of sex and sexuality that we encounter in the contemporary society. Interestingly, the article concludes the Pauline epistle by presenting sex as a blessing that enables us human beings to attain communion of persons.

So, this issue of the *Journal of Dharma* brings together contemporary reflections on sex and sexuality. All these articles approach sexuality from various angles of religions. Interestingly, all of them converge on the need of cultivating a positive attitude towards sex and sexuality, so much so that human wholeness – individually and socially – can be finally attained.

Indeed, sex as a physical and psychological endowment has many far reaching dimensions affecting the human person as a whole. In our attempt to avoid any mechanistic or physical understanding of sex and sexuality, the contemporary era is in need of pooling together all that sex and sexuality can effect in the life of an individual and society. Approaching

sex as a tool to attain pleasure and individual fulfilment, a holistic approach calls us to take it to be a fundamental human vital energy that is capable of effecting lasting relationship between two individuals of opposite sex, and through them opening up the horizons of human communion to the rest of the humankind. If this could be attained, sexual power and the ensuing lasting relationship would ultimately turn out to be the cornerstone of a flourishing human person, on the one hand, and a stable, happy, and progressive human society, on the other.

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