

SPIRITUALITY OF SEX

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1. Introduction

In religious or spiritual circles and also outside of them, human beings basically tend to have one of two fundamental views or value judgments with regard to the ultimate nature of sexuality. One of these views holds that sexuality is good, healthy, and natural. This is obviously a very popular belief in the time that we live in and is often fuelled by a certain rebellion against the repressive ideas and traditions of the past. The other view, which many traditional religions seem to emphasize, is that sexuality is dirty and evil, something to be ashamed of and eschewed by serious spiritual contenders. This might have prompted Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) to state that “Christianity gave *Eros* poison to drink: he did not die of it but degenerated – into vice.”¹ Benedict XVI, the present Pope, his countryman, might have felt that it was his obligation to give a fitting reply to the above mentioned vicious attack on the Church and its morality. In *Deus Caritas Est*, his first Encyclical Letter, he took up the issue, and engaged in a scholarly exposition. He inquires:

According to Friedrich Nietzsche, Christianity had poisoned *eros*, which for its part, while not completely succumbing, gradually degenerated into vice. Here the German philosopher was expressing a widely-held perception: doesn't the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life? Doesn't she blow the whistle just when the joy which is the Creator's gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?²

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¹Friedrich Nietzsche, http://thinkexist.com/quotation/christianity_gave_eros_poison_to_drink-he_did_not/. Nietzsche praised Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and the mastermind behind the Protestant revolution, who married an ex-nun, for rebelling against Catholic tradition of priestly celibacy. “... perhaps Luther's greatest merit was to have had the courage of his sensuality” (Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy & The Genealogy of Morals*, New York: Doubleday, 1956, 232).

²Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Encyclical Letter, 2005), at [www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_050605_dc.html), §3.

Kama means a ‘desire’/’passion’/’craving’ for pleasure, a craving for all things pleasurable, in particular sexual and sensual. It is also the name of the Indian God who represents the sexual nature in human beings, much like *Eros* did to the Greeks. Even though ‘sex’ was/is/will always be the most popular and attractive subject, flooding the internet and bookshops with books on Tantrism³ is comparatively a recent phenomenon. There were westerners like Sir John Woodruff (a.k.a. Arthur Avalon) who defended Tantras as the “ancient heart” of the Vedas and decried the blindness of those who reject all eroticism in the service of religion. In contrast, Swami Vivekananda has clearly bowdlerized his own guru’s teaching to promote a kind Hinduism remarkable for its likeness to the missionary Christianity.⁴ ‘Sex’, along with its dangers and possibilities, posed issues and concerns not merely for Christianity and Hinduism alone. All religions, civilisations, and societies had to and still face this most fundamental reality of human existence. There were diametrically opposite views regarding the benefits and risks involved in promoting and developing an allegiance to *Eros*. Is sex an indispensable part of the spiritual path towards enlightenment and Self- or God-realization or is it an empty promise that distracts us from realizing our full human potential? Is the sexual force in itself good, bad, dirty, or evil? This essay is an attempt to elucidate human beings’ love-hate relationship with *Eros*, by specifically dealing with a successful offshoot that emerged from it in the field of spirituality, namely, bridal or spousal mysticism, which is to serve as a convincing response to the accusation against Catholic Church that it recoils from sexuality.

³Tantrism is a complex body of religious practices that spread throughout the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions; it is a form of spirituality that seemingly combines sexuality, sensual pleasure, and the full range of physical experience with religious life. Tantra has held a central yet conflicting role within the western imagination ever since the ‘discovery’ of Indian religions by European scholars. Always radical, always extremely Other, Tantra has proven a key factor in the imagining of India.

⁴Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, 153-154. Vivekananda’s agenda to “unsex” the Hindu pantheon is still being carried out, not only by the Ramakrishna Mission but also by a variety of far right religious parties in India. Meanwhile Indian gurus, like Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (later known as Osho), who travelled to America and imported his own brand of ‘neo-Tantrism’, marketed Tantrism to the late-twentieth-century American consumer culture.

2. *Kāmasūtra*: An Ascent from Animal-Sex to Human-Sex

Sex is customary to the higher grade living organisms. Normally, its operation is governed by natural instincts. The Mother Nature’s purpose of sex is nothing but to ensure the survival of species. Spurred by this most basic instinct, the male and the female collaborate to realize self-preservation. However, in the case of human beings their natural sex could be elevated to a supernatural realm. Self-preservation is not the sole purpose of human sexuality. It is true that human beings have very strong sexual instinct. We often hear of cases in which individuals succumb to this basic instinct and find powerless to be in control. Many even profess that it is impossible and abnormal for human beings to contain and bridle this basic source of potent power. However, it is our experience that those two exceptional human faculties, namely, self-awareness and freedom of choice, are powerful enough to facilitate and enable human beings to contain and restrain the free reign of the animal instinct that they have inherited and elevate sex to human or even divine realms!

Self-awareness, self-control, and the ability to make free choices are capable of enabling human beings to elevate their sex-life to a higher level far beyond the one that of the animal world. Human sex can serve certain purposes that far exceed mere procreation. It is a known fact that the enjoyment that human beings derive out of sexual acts surpasses that of all other living organisms. Among human beings companionship often supersedes the procreative purpose of the sexual relationship. However, all sexual acts that occur among human beings need not be always ‘human-sex’. When it is entirely instinct-driven and not a ‘will-driven human act’, it denigrates itself to mere ‘animal-sex’. *Kāmasūtra* of Vatsyayana⁵ is a classic example of how the ancient Indians managed to transcend the animal-sex and began enjoying human-sex, a phenomenal elevation from profane sexuality to sacred sexuality. Vatsyayana elevated lovemaking into an art, which human beings alone are capable of. His erotic, exotic techniques, practices, and positions spark an immediate vision and

⁵Vatsyayana, through *Kāmasūtra*, elevated sexual intimacy into a wilful act with total self-awareness and self-control. *Kāma* means carnal desire and *Sūtra* means aphorism. The *Kāmasūtra* details many lovemaking techniques, the Sixty-Four Arts, courting practices, modes of touching including biting and scratching, sexual positions or *āsanas*, ways of treating marriage partners as well as consorts, the concocting of aphrodisiacs, etc. Vatsyayana has given the art of lovemaking a dual responsibility and has accorded both the sexes equal level of satisfaction.

response in the human mind and body. When one speaks of the *Kāmasūtra*, in modern culture, it is most often equated with sex and sex positions, though that is not all it is about. It is a call to elevate sex from animal level to human level. Following the footsteps of Vatsyayana, the later generations developed sex not just into an art but a consecrated path towards enlightenment.

3. Tantra Yoga and the Sacred Sex

When sex was eschewed by many religions, considering it impure and incompatible with the pursuit of spiritual life, there emerged *Tantra* with a diametrically opposite view. Tantra yoga has a different and more radical opinion on sex. Recently, numerous well-researched articles and books are published that provide us a refined understanding of the political, religious, and cultural dialectics and dynamics of India that produced Tantra yoga. It is generally accepted that Tantrism as a generic category designating a self-consciously constructed religious tradition did not exist before the colonial encounter. Like Hinduism, Tantrism too came into being as a category in the dialectical encounter between the exotic Orient and the humdrum Occident.⁶ Tantric yoga often served as a shifting amalgam of fantasies, fears, and wish-fulfilment of the West.⁷ It is quite clear that in the Indian and the Western imagination of the early nineteenth century Tantric yoga had connotations of secret occult power, while by the mid- to late twentieth century the terms are widely equated with sexuality, openness, and liberation.⁸ Tantra takes the approach that one should not reject the body and its desires, but actually embrace them on the road to enlightenment. It promotes the view that sexual intercourse can be a sacrament and a means of spiritual transformation.

Tantra Yoga considers *Kāma* (desire) as the prime motivating force of the universe; so, it does not ask its aspirants to renounce desire. Many other spiritual sciences advise the avoidance of desire, which they claim leads to bondage and is an obstacle to achieving higher consciousness. They try to overcome desire through asceticism. Yet, one is left with the paradox that to achieve desirelessness, one must have a strong desire to be without desire. Tantra Yoga asserts that desires are natural and that as long as we are embodied, we will have them. Our sense organs serve as windows through which the objects of our desires enter. The constant

⁶Urban, *Tantra*, 27.

⁷Urban, *Tantra*, 3.

⁸Urban, *Tantra*, 27.

presence of desire arouses a yearning and love for the desired object. Most desires centre on the physical body and its comforts. People become slaves to their instincts, which constitute the lower part of the personality and fall prey to agitation, loneliness, anxiety, dissatisfaction, selfishness, and misery. Tantra Yoga offers practical tools for reprogramming the mind and our desires. By means of physical and ritual cleaning, breathing exercises (*pranayama*), contemplation, visualization (of *yantras* and deities), repetition of a mantra (*mantra pooja*), Tantra Yoga helps to unfold our divine nature. After all, it is in the act of procreation that human beings conspicuously participate in the most potent creative energy of the Divine!

Tantra yoga suggests that sexuality can be a very powerful force that can be harnessed for increased self-awareness. Thus, tantra yoga is unusual, in that it not only allows sexual feelings and contact, but uses sexual experience as a means to enlightenment. The Tantra yogis, like modern psychologists, maintain that there is an enormous energy locked into sexuality, which, if released from the lower end of the spine, can flow up the spinal column to bring divine illumination in the brain. They believe that within the interior of the spine, in a hollow region called the *canalis centralis*, there is an energy conduit called *suśumna*. Along this conduit, from the base of the *perineum* to the top of the head, flows the most powerful of all psychic energies, *Kuśdalini* energy. On the other side of the canal are two additional energy channels, one called *Ida*, corresponding to the male, and the other the *Pingala*, corresponding to the female. *Ida* is at the right of the base of the spine and the *pingala* begins at the left. These two psychic currents are said to coil upward around the spine and the *suśumna*, like snakes crossing the *chakras* (energy wheel of centre of conscious). *Kuśdalini* yogi's lifelong task is to evolve through various *chakra* qualities and challenges, thereby bringing the focus of the *Kuśdalini* energy upward from the base of the spine to the top of the head. Once the yogi has achieved mastery of self by relaxing body tension, silencing mental chatter, and releasing energy blocks, one is ready to join with a partner whose energies and spirit complement one's own in such a way that together they form a 'whole'. The partners must first achieve a highly developed awareness within their being, a process that might take a lifetime, before being ready to engage in a tantric embrace.

In the tantric lovemaking experience, known as *maithuna*, the lovers undergo a variety of meditations and rituals before they actually make physical contact. They maintain the spiritual link or bond throughout the

lovmaking process. They visualize the flow of *prāṇic* currents between them. In Tantric Yoga, the lovers do not try to achieve orgasm. In fact, they work hard to prolong it as orgasm is not their final goal. They attempt to reach that stage of total absorption or union where mind is quietened, a state far beyond the coveted ‘rapture’⁹ or the ecstasy or mere corporeal orgasm. They attempt to draw the forces of *Kuṇḍalini* energy upward through their body-minds, thus, releasing the power of various *chakras*. This force transforms the yogi psychologically, changing his/her personality as the *Kuṇḍalini* rises to each succeeding *chakra*. The emphasis is not on the sexual release as an end in and of itself, but on sex as a channel through which the evolution of self may proceed. The goal of Tantra is the union of dynamic and static aspects of personality. It is quite different from practices that dwell on renunciation and desirelessness.

Modern Tantrism is a blend of ancient Tantric rituals, the *Kāmasūtra* teachings, modern psychology, and eastern philosophy. Using a variety of tools, supreme among them sexuality, the Tantric masters considered the ultimate goal to be dissolving of the ego and complete union with the divine energy that is within all human beings. They claim that practising the art of sexual ecstasy and having entered the divine realms of ego dissolution over and over allows for the veils and boundaries of separation to fall at our feet. We open again and again, each time allowing more in – friends, lovers, family, orgasms, nature, abundance, light, dark, and spirit. Nothing seems separate anymore, including our selves. At times, we even experience our own divinity – our own true nature. That is when transformation and transcendence occur. However, it is quite evident that most westerners have a very shallow view of Tantric Yoga – they only see the sexual side of it. Tantra yogis, however, claim that their practice is a very deep and esoteric discipline which channels the creative energies in the direction of permanent enlightenment.

4. Islamic View of Sex

Islam teaches that Allah created two different and distinct genders as a pair (Qur’an 75:39, 53:45, 92:3). The male is different from the female (Qur’an 3:36) although ultimately both are from the same source (Qur’an 4:1, 7:189, 16:72, 30:12, 39:6). Each gender is encouraged to maintain its biological, psychological, emotional, and social identity. This is for the

⁹Also known as ‘break-through’, an inexplicable experience which mystics fail to categorize whether it is pain or pleasure, probably beyond both.

purpose of facilitating and regulating relations between the two genders for the good of the whole society. Islam forbids complete rejection and suppression of the sexual instinct. Islam insists that celibacy and monasticism practised among Christians and other religions are human inventions (Qur'an 57:27) which go against basic human nature.¹⁰

Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist and sociologist, speaks of two theories of sexual dynamics that govern the Muslim society: one 'explicit' and the other 'implicit'. The 'explicit' theory holds that men are aggressive in their interaction with women, and women are passive. This theory casts the man as the hunter and the woman as his prey. This vision is widely shared and deeply ingrained in both men's and women's vision of themselves. According to Mernissi, the 'implicit' theory contradicts the above said theory of female sexuality based on an interpretation of the Qur'an and commands a profound impact on the Muslim unconsciousness. This conception of female sexuality casts the woman as the hunter and the man as the passive victim. While both theories acknowledge women's irresistible power to deceive and defeat men, not by force but by cunning and intrigue, in the implicit theory, this power of the female, associated in particular with her active sexuality, is seen as an element that is the most destructive to Muslim social order in which the feminine is regarded as synonymous with the satanic.¹¹ Man has no choice: he can only give in to her attraction. Therefore, she is identified with *fitna* (chaos) and with the anti-divine and anti-social forces of the universe.¹²

5. Pro-Celibacy Trends among Indian Religions

Brahmacharya or celibacy does not necessarily have, in the Hindu society, any connection with the spiritual life, *sadhana* (spiritual practice), or self-realization. In ancient India, a person's life was divided into four stages. The first stage was the student stage, or *brahmacharya*, where young people were expected to prepare themselves for their adult lives to come. During this stage, they were expected to observe strict celibacy. The second and third stages were *Grihasta* (householder's stage) and *Vanaprasta* (Forest retreat stage). The fourth stage was *Sannyasa*. Once a

¹⁰Omar Hassan Kasule Sr., *Human Sexuality and the Shariat*, www.zawaj.com/articles/sexuality_kasule.html

¹¹Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987, 32-33.

¹²Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, 41.

person becomes a *sannyasin*, or a monk, then celibacy was automatic. Thus, concept of *brahmacharya* or celibacy was part and parcel of the Indian-Hindu social tradition. Buddha taught that as long as one is engaged in sexual activity, s/he will not be interested in practising spiritual life. When he gave his gradual enlightenment teaching, he said that lust which is after pleasure will gradually lead to fear, greed, jealousy, anger, hatred, confusion, and fighting. All these negative things arise from lust.

Sexuality has its own rhythm. It is a part of human experience, the part that relentlessly and with all its tricks and sweet temptations, which always demands procreation. It is up to the individuals to respond to it or not. Not responding to it means that nothing happens. Renouncing that part can strengthen one's conviction that it is possible to be free in this life from the blind forces of nature. Celibacy is a precious opportunity for individuals to discover and investigate true independence, un-distracted and with great devotion. The more one lets go of his/her romantic helplessness and angry blaming, the more s/he would see wo/men as the human beings they are. They are no longer the prey that a wo/man has to trap in order to fill the vacuum within and, thus, to survive. Here, a new attitude and vision emerges in one's approach towards the other sex. It is possible to trust them, to be a human being among human beings; no more a hunter after the prey.

Sexuality is best understood as the basic force of attraction between women and men, a force of human growth that needs to be cultivated, but in the right way, with discipline and with choices that are mature, so that it does not become a source of neurosis. However, as soon as we say that there is something wrong with sexuality, then we side with those who do not believe that everything that God has made is good. What we do with sex may not be good, but that could never mean that the sexual force itself is not absolutely essential. That force is not to be repressed but transmuted, transformed, and integrated into the whole of our being; then, we have a whole human being. Sexuality is a positive power, and it is a hazard in celibacy only if one denies it and then represses one's feelings instead of integrating them into the evolving development of one's faculties, including one's intuitive and spiritual faculties, which are fostered by a celibate commitment. Practice of celibacy should not result out of coercion. Teachings, which say that one has to be a celibate if she/he wants to be on the path of spiritual awakening, are mistaken. If sexuality just falls away from us in total contentment and in a total 'yes' from our inner being, then abstinence or celibacy is a virtue. But if not, if it is a

forced thing as an external authority or religious teaching insists that this is the right way, we would never get rid of sexuality.

There is a great advantage to celibacy because one can remove oneself from the preoccupation with all the mundane things that have to do with sex and that tend to keep one attached, needy, jealous, and so on. If we, once and for all, do not bother with it and remove ourselves from it, we probably have a better chance to focus our energies on spiritual matters. That is a great possibility, but it has to happen at the right time, with maturity.

6. Origins of Bridal Mysticism

Bridal mysticism was at times accused of emotionalism, experience mania, sensationalism, and irrationality. Religious leadership often watched bridal mystics with suspicion and time and again violently suppressed their trend as unorthodox and subversive. Probably, the early forms of the Occidental bridal mysticism were influenced by the myth of Eros and Psyche, which was quite popular during late Hellenism. Indeed, we find a Gnostic interpretation of this myth in the anonymous homily entitled *Exegesis on the Soul*,¹³ which describes the sacrament of the Bridal Chamber. During the Renaissance, Greek themes and images were rediscovered in Italy and elsewhere in Europe. Certainly, the form of Teresa's vision, and the symbolism illustrated by Bernini, lies very close to the tale of the god of love and his human beloved. Psyche's name means 'soul' and she begins her career as a mortal. It is because Eros loves her and wants her for his bride, that Zeus is willing to elevate her to the status of an immortal. For Teresa, the moment in which she experiences the spiritual wound is but one moment in a complex drama culminating in the spiritual marriage, when such wounds will no longer be felt but are supplanted by a complete interior union of God and the soul. The two traditions that are joined in this image of Saint Teresa are that of Greek mythology story of Psyche and Eros and Renaissance Christian mysticism, in which the soul is awakened to spiritual passion. There is, however, one important variation: In the Greek tale (recounted by Apuleius) it is not Eros who wounds Psyche with one of his arrows (in fact, he wounds himself when he first

¹³*Exegesis on the Soul*, one of the Gnostic scripture recovered in the Nag Hammadi Library, explains in poetic style the human soul's alienated condition in the world, its step by step awakening, and the eventual recovery of its original wholeness and wisdom. It is a spiritual as well as a psychological process.

beholds her); rather, Psyche accidentally wounds herself when, disobeying him, she takes up a light to see what he looks like. In Teresa's vision, she, as 'soul', is completely passive and receives the wound at the hands of an Eros figure. Nevertheless, central to both scenes is the symbol of wounding, the origin of love in pain inflicted from without.

The marriage between the human soul and the divine lover represents a creative union of the human self with its transpersonal counterpart. The soul symbolizes the subjective capacity to feel and experience reality-capacity for consciousness. By uniting with the god of love, the soul gains a permanent connection with the abiding source of all life and love. In the infant, there is not yet the separation that gives rise to a subjective self. In the symbolism of the sacred marriage, a return to the original wholeness is achieved without a regression to the infantile unconsciousness.

According to many mystics, the desire for human love and the desire for spiritual fulfilment are intrinsically related. From a psychological point of view, they are two expressions of the same basic desire, i.e., to be united with one's beloved. Both the lover and the mystic seek complete fulfilment. Both can be inflamed with passion for their goal and be obsessed with the pursuit. The physical act of love reaches its zenith when two bodies and two minds are intimately united during sexual intercourse. All cares and concerns melt away as lovers awash in sensual pleasure, losing themselves in one another and melting into a state of blissful union. This experience of blissful melding is common to both sexual and spiritual fulfilment. Mystics, too, seek the experience of total union. The fusion they seek, however, is with God, not a lover, and the result is not an exquisite sensual experience but a complete absorption in God's fullness.

Such mystics consider themselves brides, accepting God as their spiritual husband. Although the lover and the mystic strive for oneness very differently, it is actually the same oneness they seek, according to some mystics. For them, there cannot be varieties of oneness. Oneness is the utter perfection remaining when everything that limits or isolates has been cast aside. Oneness is the experience of reality freed from all that obscures or distorts it in any way. Oneness is the fundamental reality, the truth of God. Mystics sometimes express themselves using passionate and poignant metaphors based on human love. Among these, the most striking is the mystic's symbolic espousal and marriage to God. Spiritual practices, employing such symbolism, constitute bridal mysticism.

In almost all religious traditions we come across with examples of bridal mysticism. Their scriptures often bear witness to the glory of the

divine love or pure devotion through numerous hymns belonging to the genre of bridal mysticism.¹⁴ They are revealed in this form of selfless love, steeped in the bliss of the divine experience by constantly remembering him. It is said that bridal mysticism (*mādhurya bhāva*) is the all-rounded, most intimate, highest ecstasy, and most exalted expression of pure transcendental love. Also, the bridal mysticism is considered to be inclusive of all the qualities of other *bhāvas* or *rasas*, where all other *bhāvas*¹⁵ attain their spiritual perfection. Bridal mysticism is characteristic of pure love or devotion (*bhakti*), not lust; for, love and lust are two totally different feelings. Bridal mysticism, in its essence, acts in a way that is pleasing to the divine will (eternal law). Other characteristics of pure devotion include abandoning of all desires and fear, keeping devotion unadulterated, being steadfast in devotion to the One Divine only, and keeping mind engaged in meditation and deep reflections.

A soul fallen in love with God leaves the worldly pleasures to the worldly people and longs for union with God as her groom in body and soul. The longing and seeking of the Lord as her bridegroom is the essence of bridal mysticism. The soul in the practice and experience of bridal mysticism goes through the harrowing experience of separation from him (*viśleṣam*) and the exhilarating experience of union (*samśleṣam*) with him. For enamoured souls, *viśleṣam* appears to be stretched into eternity while, in *samśleṣam*, the eternity is crowded into a moment. The soul suffers the worst from separation from her Lord. She may implore birds, flowers, the dark rain clouds, and bees to be her messengers to her Lord and to bring him to her quickly. She is reminded of her Lord in everything she sees around her. After these painful efforts that get her nowhere, she decides to put up with her sorrow and places her trust in the Lord’s infinite mercy. The soul has to annihilate her ego (*ahāṅkāra*) to realize the fruits of bridal mysticism. Even the presence of a tiny bit of *ahāṅkāra* (divisive ego) leads to sorrow. Once that is banished in the intense pursuit of realizing the unitive life with the Lord, as her groom, the soul will face the

¹⁴For example: “I am the bride; the Creator is my Husband, Lord. I adorn myself to His liking. When it pleases Him, He enjoys me. My body and mind are joined to the True Lord.” *Sad Guru Grandha Sahib*, 1128.

¹⁵God could be approached through different mental states such as *ānt Bhāva* (tranquillity), *Dās Bhāva* (master and a servant relationship), *Sakhā Bhāva* (friendship or comradeship), *Vātsalya Bhāva* (affection, like between mother and child), and *Mādhurya Bhāva* (bridal mysticism).

sorrows undismayed and enjoy pleasures uncontaminated. Any bit of divisive ego has to be pulverised through total surrender to the Lord, the eternal bridegroom. The love of the soul for her Lord should be selfless – love of God for the sake of love and for nothing else, not even for the sake of salvation is the true mark of bridal mysticism. God is both the path and the goal of the journey on this earth – a path in which there is no self-losing and a goal to which his wisely guided steps are surely arriving at every moment. True love brings with it deep humility, an awareness of one’s insignificance before all and helplessness before God. A love-stricken soul would not feel it as a humiliation at all when she goes out with her sufferings to pretty little things like flowers and bees and seeks consolation from them. It is this humility, born of love of God that helps her win the game of love. Spiritual union with the Lord in wedlock brings to the bride utter rapture, joy, and contentment. Due to the absence of selfishness the soul would prefer that all human souls should come to experience this marvellous divine union.

7. *Mādhurya Bhāva*: The Hindu Bridal Mysticism

Mirābaī, Āndal, and Akkamahadevan are renowned models among Hindu bridal mystics. They considered their souls as the eternal brides, the Lord being their eternal Bridegroom. All the three excelled in the life of renunciation and divine realization. They lived in entirely different regions, wrote in their respective language in different age and milieu, but became legends in their lifetime itself, by the austere life and single purpose of pursuit of God and, finally, divine attainment. The Hindu tradition calls it *bhakti*, and describes it as the highest love for God, through which one attains immortality and fulfilment. To experience the bridal mysticism, all souls are considered as female in relation to the Supreme Being, who is considered the only man (*Puruṣottama*). Through devotional practices, mystics strive to develop passionate love for God that draws them towards ecstatic union. In these practices, they often use various types of human love as model or paradigm. In bridal mysticism, union between the soul and God is recognized as spiritual marriage. The great outpouring of the soul to realize the Lord as her husband is the essence of bridal mysticism. Just as engagement precedes marriage, spiritual espousal – the dedication of one’s life to God – precedes spiritual marriage. Just as a marriage is consummated with sexual union, the mystic’s marriage is consummated through ecstatic union with God. Mirābaī wrote of her spiritual espousal in beautiful verses:

Come to my pavilion, O my King!

I have spread a bed made of delicately selected buds and blossoms
and have arrayed myself in bridal dress from head to toe.¹⁶

In contemplation and prayer, the mystic prepares for intimate union, awaiting God’s sacred touch like a woman awaiting the caress of her lover. But God’s presence cannot be commanded; divine union is not a matter of choice. Instead, the mystic must wait patiently, passively, in a state of utter surrender. God’s presence comes when one is receptive, figuratively naked, being stripped of all pretence and pride.

In the Hindu tradition of *Gaudiya Vaiṣṇavism*,¹⁷ every person is considered female in relation to God, the only masculine being in existence. All are weak and helpless compared to God’s power and majesty. All are entirely dependent on God for each breath and moment of life. In the consummation of spiritual marriage, God is the assertive partner, penetrating the devotee with divine love and filling her with the ravishing joy of blissful union. Therefore, regardless of being male or female, mystics assume the woman’s role in spiritual marriage. They become brides, and God alone is the bridegroom. God is like the powerful, desirable lover who comes to seduce and possess his beloved. In prayerful contemplation, the mystic anxiously awaits God’s arrival, remaining passive and receptive.

For male mystics, to take a feminine role is particularly radical – they must set aside their essential maleness for the sake of spiritual growth. Some male practitioners of bridal mysticism strive to cultivate feminine qualities to strengthen the spiritual marriage. The presence of feminine qualities in all men is well-known. The famous psychologist Carl Jung said that all men possess an *anima*, a feminine nature or soul that exists in addition to their male personas.¹⁸ Whereas most men ignore or suppress

¹⁶Mirabai, *The Devotional Poems of Mirabai*, trans. A. J. Alston, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1980, 96.

¹⁷Gaudiya Vaishnavism was promoted by Sri Krishna Chaitanya in the 16th century CE. This tradition in many ways is unique amidst the various *bhakti*-traditions, both ancient and modern, of India. Aside its profound philosophical treatises, it is well known for its developed aesthetic insights into the dynamics of the eternal loving sports of God. www.gaudiya-discussions.com/articles/ (David C. Scott, “Radha in the Erotic Play of the Universe”).

¹⁸Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), a Swiss psychiatrist, was the founder of Analytical Psychology. His approach to human psychology emphasized understanding the psyche through exploring the world of dreams, art, mythology,

the *anima*, some mystics actively nurture it as a spiritual practice. As their feminine qualities become highly developed, their intimacy with God as His spiritual bride deepens. The great South Indian saint, Nammālvār, is an example of a mystic who cultivated a feminine self-image for this purpose. He wrote passionate devotional poetry in which he expressed himself as a love-sick woman longing for her beloved Lord Kṛṣṇa:

I desired to see and lo!
I lost my fine complexion,
My bracelets slipped off my emaciated arms,
My breasts became pale and I became jaded.¹⁹

There is probably no better example of gender reversal in bridal mysticism than the famous nineteenth-century Indian saint, Sri Ramakrishna. He was very much inspired by stories about the *gopis*, the shepherd girls, who were irresistibly attracted to Lord Kṛṣṇa. Sri Ramakrishna idealized the *gopis* and yearned to be reborn as a woman so that he could love Kṛṣṇa as they did.²⁰ To deepen his feminine qualities, as part of his spiritual practice, Sri Ramakrishna sometimes wore a silken *sari* and jewellery. He often performed ritual worship while dressed in women's clothes. His behaviour became so feminine that women began to consider him as one of their own gender.²¹ He became totally identified with Rādhā, the *gopi* who had Lord Kṛṣṇa's special attention. In prayerful contemplation, Sri Ramakrishna would weep bitterly, longing for his divine spouse to come and immerse him in blissful ecstasy. According to Sri Ramakrishna, a special faculty for perceiving God can be acquired through devotional practices. Referring to a sacred form of sexuality, he said:

God cannot be seen with these physical eyes. In the course of spiritual discipline one gets a 'love body' endowed with 'love eyes', 'love ears', and so on. One sees God with those 'love eyes'. One

world religion, and philosophy. He was a strong believer in the importance of integration of opposites (e.g., masculine and feminine, thinking and feeling, science and spirituality). Jung proposed the presence of anima and animus in every person and identified the anima as being the unconscious feminine component of men and the animus as the unconscious masculine component in women. See Carl Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious*, Tel-Aviv: Dvir Co. Ltd., 1973 (originally 1917).

¹⁹Nammālvār, *Tiruvaymoli*, VIII.2.1, trans. S. Satyamurthi Ayyangar, Bombay: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, 1981, 738.

²⁰Swami Nikhilananda, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, New York: Ramakrishna-Vedanta Center, 1984, 6.

²¹Nikhilananda, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 24-25.

hears the voice of God with those ‘love ears’. One even gets a sexual organ made of love. With this ‘love body’ the soul communes with God.²²

It could be said that Sri Ramakrishna took the practice of bridal mysticism to an extreme. However, by examining such extremes, we can gain important insights. When we understand how and why mystics incorporate sexuality into their spiritual practice, we cannot help but see its purely sacred nature. The lives and teachings of such mystics offer us a rare and precious perspective. By seeing through their eyes, our own vision is widened. Sexuality is sacred when it takes us towards God. With a human lover, sexuality can provide a glimpse of God’s limitless fullness. Turned towards God, sexuality can lead to the most intimate and transforming relationship possible, culminating in total absorption in God’s fullness. Sexuality is a glorious part of God’s creation. It is a wonderful and precious facet of life. It is, after all, a gift from God, a gift not to be taken lightly.

8. Bridal Mystic Trend in Judaism

Bridal mysticism has never been in the mainstream of Jewish religious practice, although it was and is practised by those seeking the experience of union with God. This practice has a solid theological basis, supported by the Hebrew Bible. The prophet Isaiah says: “For your Maker is your husband, the Lord Almighty is his name...” (Is. 54:5) “... As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you” (Is. 62:5). The Bible’s most striking use of bridal symbolism is found in the Song of Solomon, also known as the *Song of Songs*. This book is comprised of a passionate, metaphoric conversation between God and a human soul. In this dialogue, God is represented as the bridegroom and soul the bride. As it opens, the bride says to her beloved:

Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth,
for Your love is more delightful than wine.
Pleasing is the fragrance of Your perfumes;
Your name is like perfume poured out.
No wonder the maidens love You!
Take me away with You – let us hurry!
Let the King bring me into His chambers (Song. 1:2-4).

Later, the bride describes a tender moment:

²²Nikhilananda, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, 115.

He has taken me to the banquet hall,
and His banner over me is love.
Strengthen me with raisins,
refresh me with apples,
for I am faint with love.
His left arm is under my head,
and His right arm embraces me (Song. 2:4-6).

The bride, finding her lover missing one night, searches for her
bridegroom and returns with him to the bridal chamber:

All night long on my bed
I looked for the one my heart loves;
I looked for Him but did not find Him.
I will get up now and go about the city,
through its streets and squares;
I will search for the one my heart loves.
So I looked for Him but did not find Him.
The watchmen found me
as they made their rounds in the city.
“Have you seen the one my heart loves?”
Scarcely had I passed them
when I found the one my heart loves.
I held Him and would not let Him go
till I had brought Him to my mother’s house,
to the room of the one who conceived me (Song. 3:1-4).

The bridegroom later sings praising the dazzling beauty of his bride, using
surprisingly sensuous language:

How beautiful you are, my darling!
Oh, how beautiful!
Your eyes behind your veil are doves.
Your hair is like a flock of goats
descending from Mount Gilead.
You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride;
you have stolen my heart
with one glance of your eyes,
with one jewel of your necklace.
How delightful is your love, my sister, my bride!
How much more pleasing is your love than wine,
and the fragrance of your perfume than any spice!

Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride;
milk and honey are under your tongue.

The fragrance of your garments is like that of Lebanon (Song. 4:1, 9-11).

8. Christian Bridal Mysticism

In Christianity, there is a rich tradition of bridal mysticism. It uses nuptial and erotic imagery to describe the soul's relation with God. There are many scriptural passages (Isa. 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Jer. 2:2; 3:20; Hos. 2:19; Ezek. 16:8; Mt. 9:15; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:25-27; Rev. 10:7-9; 19:7-9; 21:2; 22:17) that describe the relationship between Israel and God or Church and Christ along this line. The Fathers of the Church continued this tradition through their writings. Origen's²³ *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is a clear example of this trend. This unusual piece of biblical literature is a narrative of the most sacred of human events, the love between two persons. It is primarily a human love song, though it is also described allegorically as God's relationship with his people. Rather than being an embarrassment, the vivid sensuousness and even eroticism of the Song portraying celebration of sexual love. In the 12th century, Bernard of Clairvaux borrowed images of human love, sexual experience, and marriage from the *Song of Songs*, and Richard of St. Victor used the symbolic language of betrothal, marriage, wedlock, and the fruitfulness of the soul to describe the developing union of the soul with God. This imagery was elaborated in the 13th century lay movement of the Beguines. They described their experience of mystical union in terms of ecstasy, erotic sexuality, and passionate loving devotion. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Theresa of Avila, and John of the Cross later likened the loving, transforming union of the soul with God to mystical marriage, in which God and the contemplative become one in spirit and love. In this practice, Christ is considered the bridegroom while practitioners envision themselves as brides of Christ, even if they happen to be male. The goal of this practice is to experience blissful, ecstatic union with God as one's beloved.

²³Origen of Alexandria (185-254 CE) is considered one of the greatest of all Christian theologians. As a philosopher, he is famous for composing the seminal work of Christian Neo-Platonism, *On First Principles*. Origen lived through a turbulent period of the Christian Church, when persecution was widespread and little or no doctrinal consensus existed among various regional churches.

8.1. Foundations of Bridal Mysticism in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul addressed the faithful of Corinth as follows: “... I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him” (2 Cor. 11:2). In the Book of Revelations, bridal symbolism is employed in this metaphoric verse: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7). Numerous passages in the Bible bear witness to an idea that in the same way that man and woman are to become ‘one flesh’, human beings should become the faithful spouse of the divine bridegroom. Once the dynamics of male, female, and the mental/spiritual dimension of a true and genuine marriage is envisioned, we must begin to apply this concept to every aspect of our lives.

Jesus frequently used figures drawn from marriage to illustrate his teaching concerning the coming of the kingdom, as Paul did concerning Christ and the Church. Both the Old and the New Testaments warn us that there are two paths – the narrow path that leads to Life, and the broad one that is walked by the multitudes of people into destruction. When our attention is directed towards mundane affairs, we are said to be carnal, and we belong to this world. When we are able to direct our attention towards heavenly affairs, then we are moving in a spiritual direction, and our consciousness is actually expanding. Paul stated:

It is good for a man not to touch a woman... But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this... An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord’s affairs – how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord’s affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband (1 Cor. 7:1; 26-35).

Paul’s observation that it would be better for man not to touch a woman is based on a number of factors. In not understanding the sacredness and depth of the relationship’s potential, men are merely squandering away the vital energy that could instead be channelled in a better way than to be lost in nature. Our physical bodies were not created to torment us; rather, every inclination was manifest within us for a higher reason and purpose that we must embrace and raise to its highest expression. It is not until we understand that the attractions and urges of men and women to come

together goes far beyond a biological need, that we can begin to perceive both the laws working within and without us, as well as the forces that will bring about our eventual destiny.

The coming together of the sexes is initiated by a need that is manifest in the human soul; once properly understood from a higher perspective, it can be used to perceive the movement of every aspect of Creation itself. The human soul, which is neither male nor female, dwells in a realm where these forces of mind exist in harmony. Once this is understood, we can look beyond the realm of physical attraction, and understand that the deeper foundation of human sexual appetite is the absolute need to be complete and to know oneself. The problem that exists in the physical relationship between a human male and female is that there will always be something lacking in their relationships, until they begin to perceive that the void exists within themselves. This means that those forces and appetites we perceive as carnal and sensual can never be satisfied until we have returned to a state of Oneness with our Creator and the Source of Being.

Genuine religion is marriage. The word ‘religion’ originated from the Latin expression ‘*re legare*’, which means ‘to join’ or ‘to bring together’. This indicates that marriage and religion have the same goal – union. The true consummation of marriage is where two persons actually become *one flesh*! It is not until he – a Christian who professes his allegiance to Christ with his lips – becomes the bride of Christ, *one flesh*, that he is a Genuine Christian. There is the need for an absolute subjugation. In today’s world the term subjection has become a dirty word. The idea that a wife must be in subjection to her husband has been denigrated, maligned, and attacked as maleficent by the modern feminist movements which argue that women must be freed from what they perceive to be male domination. Yet, without the oneness and harmony between husband and wife, the vital life-force cannot be raised up into a higher state of consciousness. We must re-merge the male and female paradoxes of mind within us in an endeavour to enter into the next stage of birth. In order to become *one flesh* and enter into the divine marriage, the bride and bridegroom must move into a total and complete self-gift to the other half. What this ultimately means is that the secrets and mysteries of God are at their essence so simple in their fundamental element that the very meaning of life and all of creation can be embraced by every person who has ever lived. All we have to do is

strive to negate the polarities of life wherever and whenever we encounter them.

8.2. Bridal Mysticism in Early Christian Writings

The bride-bridegroom relationship was not just a conceptual, philosophical doctrine. For some Christian mystics, it formed the experiential framework for their main spiritual practice. In prayerful meditation and contemplation, such mystics became the brides of Christ, entering into a spiritual marriage which enabled them experience passionate, mystical union with their bridegroom, Jesus.

Although bridal mysticism is a rich tradition, there were people who found these metaphors vulgar or offensive. They had a tendency to condemn indiscriminately anything associated with sexuality as evil or sinful, as they failed to see the purity and sanctity of spiritual marriage. Anticipating such narrow views, another Christian mystic, Gregory of Nyssa, insists that one should be ashamed of celibacy:

Happy they who have still the power of choosing the better way, and have not debarred themselves from it by engagements of the secular life, as we have, whom a gulf now divides from Glorious virginity: no one can climb up to that who has once planted his foot upon the secular life.²⁴

Many of those mystics were male, so they had to grapple with being ‘male brides’. They did so by understanding their souls to be neither male nor female, thus, transcending gender divide itself. Either a female or a male human being can envisage an affectionate relationship with God; thus, the motif of the bride of God is supra-sexual. Origen, the third-century Christian mystic, in his famous exegesis of the *Song of Songs* – with his spiritualized concept of the bride – lays the foundations of a Christian bridal mysticism in which a supra-sexual soul (i.e., the soul of either a man or a woman) could take the position of a bride.

A blissful absorption can remove obstacles to experiencing God’s fullness. A fifth century Christian mystic, Dionysius, says that we are “led into a godlike oneness, into a unity reflecting God.”²⁵ He advises us: “Leave behind everything perceived and understood ... and strive upward as much as you can toward union with Him who is beyond all being and

²⁴Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2907.htm>

²⁵Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, 51.

knowledge."²⁶ Spiritual marriage is consummated in a blissful union when the mystic is finally overcome by God's irresistible power and is penetrated by divine love. About this union, Origen writes quite explicitly:

If there is anyone who has been pierced with the lovable spear of His knowledge, so that he sighs and longs for Him day and night, is able to speak of nothing else, wishes to hear of nothing else, can think of nothing else, and is not disposed to desire, seek, or hope for anything other than Him; then such a soul truly says, "I have been wounded by love."²⁷

The rapture of sexual ecstasy could be considered a partial expression of the boundless fullness experienced by mystics. Sexual desire is a power that draws one towards the beloved. Mystics consider such lust a natural but misdirected expression of the yearning for union with God. These mystics might not be completely free from sexual desires. Though dedicated to discipline and celibacy, they are still subject to normal human cravings. Until they achieve perfection, such cravings will persist. The blissful oneness experienced in human love is limited, whereas the mystic's experience is infinite. From the mystic's perspective, sexual love is a small taste of the limitless joy possible in God's fullness. The highest joy, the ultimate experience of love, is intimate communion with God.

However, there are well-intentioned adherents to mysticism who simply ignore their lusty feelings, concentrating instead on seeking God alone. Others, however, acknowledge and accept these feelings. They understand that repressing strong desires can be psychologically unhealthy and harmful. They know that their 'never fully dealt with desires' will return with a vengeance, sooner or later, probably at the weakest moments in their lives to collect the toll. At the same time, they are fully aware that immersing themselves in romantic and sexual activities would divert them from their true goal. Instead of denying or repressing these yearnings, some mystics redirect their passion away from sensual experience and towards spiritual growth. Their energies are harnessed and transmuted into a power that draws them towards absorption in God. This redirection is quite different than some forms of *tantra* in which actual sexual practices are used for purely spiritual purposes. Instead, these mystics undertake a discipline whereby natural urges are transformed or sublimated.

²⁶Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, 135.

²⁷Origen, *Light from Light*, trans. Dupre and Wiseman, New York: Paulist Press, 1988, 29.

Sublimation is not a process of destroying urges; it refines them, literally making them sublime, perfect, and sacred. Christian theologians call this bridal mysticism, the practice of turning and tuning our human emotions towards God. This practice of redirecting human passion from the sensual to the sacred is highly regarded in several traditions. The Carmelite mystics in the Catholic Christian tradition are well-known in this regard.

8.3. Bridal Mysticism and the Carmelite Mystics

The term mystical marriage was used by John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila to designate the highest state of Christian perfection attainable in this life. Espousal to Christ or spiritual marriage denotes the state of a human soul living intimately united to God through grace and love (2 Cor. 11:2). It is understood as a ‘transforming’ union between soul and God, requiring extraordinary graces. The ‘transforming’ union is a permanent state higher than and distinct from the transitory spiritual betrothal. Mystical marriage constitutes a consummate union of love, total possession, a fusion of ‘lives’, in which the soul is made one with God, made divine, by participation, without losing its identity. In his famous mystical poem, *Dark Night of the Soul* (stanzas 6-8), John of the Cross gives us a vivid picture of the experience of the bride at the zenith of her mystical union:

Upon my flowering breast
 which I kept wholly for him alone,
 there he lay sleeping,
 and I caressing him
 there in a breeze from the fanning cedars.
 When the breeze blew from the turret,
 as I parted his hair,
 it wounded my neck
 with its gentle hand,
 suspending all my senses.
 I abandoned and forgot myself,
 laying my face on my Beloved;
 all things ceased; I went out from myself,
 leaving my cares
 forgotten among the lilies.

To be wounded by love is to be penetrated by God, to receive His love deep within, becoming one with Him in an intimate spiritual embrace. About the consummation of spiritual marriage, John of the Cross explains:

The spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual espousal, for it is a total transformation in the beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of the self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as possible in this life. Just as in the consummation of carnal marriage there are two in one flesh ... so also when the spiritual marriage between God and the soul is consummated, there are two natures in one spirit and love.²⁸

Teresa of Avila's poem, "*Dilectus Meus Mihi*,"²⁹ or, "My Beloved Is Mine," a title obviously taken from the *Song of Songs*, clearly depicts the above mentioned sentiments described by John of the Cross in a very precise manner:

When the sweet Hunter shot and wounded me
My soul rested upon Love's arms.
And regaining a new life
I have changed in such a way,
That I am my Beloved's
And my Beloved is mine.
I have surrendered to Him
And to such a great extent
That I am my Beloved's
And my Beloved is mine.
He wounded me with a love arrow
And my soul became one with her Creator.
I do not want any other love,
For to my God I have surrendered.
I am my Beloved's
And my Beloved is mine.

Declaring his bridal status, John of the Cross says: "I do not want any other love, for to my God I have surrendered. I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine." This becomes still clearer when, in the commentary on the *Spiritual Canticle*, we see, placed over against each other, the hiding of the Bridegroom in the Bosom of His Father and His discovery by the Bride, when He sleeps in her own lap by virtue of her over-shadowing.

²⁸St. John of the Cross, *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, 257.

²⁹St. Teresa of Avila, *Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, vol. 3, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, Trivandrum: Carmel International Publishing House, 2006, 379.

“Beloved,” the bride cries to her loved one, “Beloved, where dost Thou hide Thyself?” “O Bride,” writes John of the Cross, “Your Bridegroom is the treasure hid in the field of your own soul, a treasure for the obtaining of which the wise merchant gave all his possessions.” It is reasonable to renounce all private interests in exchange of this supreme treasure; to withdraw from all created things and to hide in the innermost hiding place of one’s soul. The bride will shut the door, that is, withdraw herself from all created things and talk to her Beloved in secret. Thus, hidden with the Bridegroom, the bride will feel His presence in secret, enjoy and caress Him in secret and rejoice with Him in being secret, i.e., beyond everything the senses can reach and the tongues can express. Now, the bride knows that the lover she seeks is hidden in her own heart, and diligently remains in secret with Him so that she would feel Him and embrace Him with the tenderest love. It arouses no surprise that St. John, where he speaks of the bounties of God, dispenses thousands. He lays particular stress on the Incarnation of God, which is the ground, where shines the ideal of our mystical union with God.

All other things, says St. John, God did in passing, as it were. In His Son, however, He saw all things and bestowed on them His beauty and His love. Through the Incarnation, He gave these a supernatural existence and lifted them up, together with human being, to the glory of God. Through the glory of the Incarnation of His Son and His resurrection, according to the flesh, the Father has not only ennobled all creatures, but clothed them also with beauty and dignity. Contemplating this secret, the soul is wounded by love. St. John clearly expresses that the Bridegroom, resting in His bride, celebrates the mystery of His Incarnation. He applies to the bride what we so eagerly apply to Our Lady: *Hortus conclusus, soror mea sponsa* (Enclosed garden, reserved for my Bridegroom). There she will embrace only Him; she will be united intimately with Him, with His nature without any meditation. This takes place only in the spiritual marriage, which is an embrace between God and the soul. In this union, John proceeds, that which is communicated is God Himself, Who gives Himself to the soul, at the same time, restoring her to a peerless loveliness. Both have grown into one, just as the pane of glass and the sunbeam that passes through it are one.

Let us not forget it that, time and again, St. John returns to the inexhaustible mystery of the Incarnation. It would be tempting to relate the manner in which St. John further describes the re-creating of the soul in God; she in God and God in her, taking His efficiency from hers. St. John

says that that is exactly the reason why the bride should follow Jesus with His cross, stripped of everything and of themselves. When St. John reminds us that, especially at the beginning, one cannot constantly be in contemplation, he says that the soul should then ever in all its thoughts, acts, good deeds, and undertakings have recourse to holy thoughts and meditations, from which it will draw more fervent piety and greater advantage. But above all, should it resort to the life, the sufferings and the death of Jesus Christ, to teach itself to imitate Jesus' life; to yield in everything, in all its acts and deeds, in life and death.

8.4. Bridal Mysticism and Bernard of Clairvaux

Another practitioner of bridal mysticism was the much-revered Saint Bernard of Clairvaux³⁰ (1090-1153), a Cistercian monk. He becomes the classic guide for those who follow the path of love in Christian spirituality.³¹ Among his works, *On Loving God* and *Sermons on the Song of Songs* give a thorough treatment of bridal mysticism. According to Jean Leclercq, for Bernard, love was the sole object of the scriptures: "Everything comes from and must lead to love... Out of love God seeks us and wants us to seek him. He longs for us, draws us to himself, and is present to us through his powerful words and in his Word."³² In his *Sermons on the Song of Solomon*, he described his experience of being mystically "penetrated" by his bridegroom. According to him, the soul adheres to Christ with all its strength; lives for Him; allows itself to be ruled by Him (*In Cant. Serm.* 85, 12). However, according to Theresa Moritz, Bernard gave priority to the church, the community of believers, over individual Christians in the role of the bride:

When he [Bernard] first identifies the subject of the Song, Bernard places the marriage of Christ and the Church before the union of Christ and the soul. Furthermore, when Bernard interprets a text under two explicitly different allegorical senses, he consistently

³⁰St. Bernard played a decisive role in the monastic reform of the twelfth century, stimulating the development of the newly founded Cistercian Order and infusing into its spirituality his own dynamic vision. He gave impetus to two devotions that flourished in the later Middle Ages, becoming major forces in subsequent spirituality, the humanity of Christ and bridal mysticism.

³¹Ewert Cousins, "Preface" in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. and foreword by G. R. Evans, Classics of Western Spirituality Series, New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987, 5.

³²Jean Leclercq, "Introduction" in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 32.

speaks first of the Church and Christ and then uses their union as a model for the relationship which he urges the individual soul to seek.³³

The focus of Bernard's bridal mysticism is on the incarnate Christ, and the goal is the ecstatic union of bride and bridegroom; by being united with the incarnate Christ, the community of believers and the individual Christian soul become ultimately united with God. Bernard pointed out that in the *Song of Songs* this quest for union is expressed by the word 'kiss' in the following verse: "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth." Bernard devoted his first nine sermons to "the kiss" and "kiss of the mouth" and their allegorical meaning and implications for Christians. Leclercq wrote in this connection that, for Bernard, "The kiss of the Father and the Son is the Holy Spirit. Christ gives the kiss to his spouse, or bride, whom he fills with his Spirit. The Spirit in turn unites the bride to the Father through the Son."³⁴ In the second sermon, Bernard wrote:

Shall I not find that a richer grace is poured out upon me from him whom the Father has anointed with the oil of gladness more than all his companions, if he will deign to kiss me with the kiss of his mouth (Ps. 44:8)? His living and effective word (Heb. 4:12) is a kiss; not a meeting of lips, which can sometimes be deceptive about the state of the heart, but a full infusion of joys, a revelation of secrets, a wonderful and inseparable mingling of the light from above and the mind on which it is shed, which, when it is joined with God, is one spirit with him (1 Cor. 6:17).³⁵

In the third sermon, Bernard elaborated further the theme of the kiss: "if any one once receives the spiritual kiss of Christ's mouth he seeks eagerly to have it again and again... It is a sealed-up fountain ... to which no stranger has access, but he who drinks from it thirsts for more."³⁶ There is a progression for Bernard from the kiss of the feet to the kiss of the hands and then to the mouth. Addressing fellow monks, he would urge them to begin with the kiss of the feet by being humble and free from pride. However, the ascent to the "kiss of the mouth" is irresistible. It is gained

³³Theresa Moritz, "The Church as Bride in Bernard of Clairvaux's Sermons on the Song of Songs" in *The Chimaeras of His Age: Studies on Bernard of Clairvaux* (Studies in Medieval Cistercian History 5), eds. E. R. Elder and J. R. Sommerfeldt, Cistercian Studies Series 63, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980, 3.

³⁴Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 47.

³⁵*Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (Sermon 2,1.2), 216.

³⁶*Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works* (Sermon 3), 221.

after "we grow in grace and learn to trust in the Lord." Then, "our experience of love increases until we come to feel God's kiss on the mouth."³⁷ Bernard, in this context, spoke of the infrequent "visit" of the bridegroom to the bride. Such visits are sources of joy and agony, at the same time:

The Bride pines away with love and is in cruel torment; having enjoyed union with the Beloved, she now finds it more painful to be separated from him. The Bridegroom's slowness to return is a bitter affliction to the Bride and his absence only heightens both her desire and her sorrow. However he may hurry to ease her impatience, she is consumed with longing until he returns.³⁸

The bride's longing for the bridegroom is intensified over periods of his absence:

"Come back, my beloved," Bernard exclaims after each visit of the Bridegroom Jesus comes so that the soul will cling to him; he goes away so that the soul will call him back. He wants us to love him and takes certain steps to win our love: He gives himself so that we will enjoy his presence; he then leaves us so that we will long for it even more.³⁹

It is interesting to note that Bernard did not consider marital love profane. According to Leclercq, "St. Bernard draws a close parallel between 'fleshly union' (*carnale connubium*) and 'spiritual marriage' (*spirituale matrimonium*). This analogy is based on constant and realistic description of conjugal love."⁴⁰ Bernard condemns those as heretics who say "that the products of sexual congress are unclean."⁴¹ "Nothing is unclean except to one who thinks it unclean." In fact, he suggests:

Copulation and child-bearing are means to salvation for married folk: "A woman shall be 'saved through child-bearing if she continues in faith' [1 Tim. 2:15]. Children shall be strengthened by the new birth of baptism [see 1 Tim. 3:5]. And adults not able to preserve

³⁷Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 47.

³⁸Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 50-51.

³⁹Leclercq, "Introduction," *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, 52.

⁴⁰John R. Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship*, New York and Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2004, 52, citing Jean Leclercq, *Monks on Marriage: A Twelfth-Century View*, New York: Seabury Press, 1982, 79.

⁴¹Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship*, 53.

continence shall be redeemed by the thirtyfold fruit of marriage [see Mt. 13:8].”⁴²

Thus, for Bernard, “Married love is, in one sense, the most complete form of human love, since it engages all the faculties of the soul – intellect, will, and feelings – and the body as well.”⁴³ In terms of Bernard’s theology, the ecstatic experience of union can only be sustained in the afterlife, as the “union” between the bride and bridegroom is consummated fully only in “heaven,” where, using the language of Bernard, the bride is transformed and “deified.” Bernard wrote:

To be thus affected is to be deified... As a drop of water mingled in wine is seen to pass away utterly from itself, while it takes on the taste and colour of the wine; as a kindled and glowing iron becomes most like the fire, having put off its former and natural form; and as the air, when flooded with the light of the sun, is transformed into the same clarity of light, so that it seems to be not merely illumined, but the light itself: so it will need be that all human affection in the Saints will then, in some ineffable way, melt from itself and be entirely poured over into the will of God.⁴⁴

According to Bernard, the final goal of spiritual union is uniting with God. There are three stages in this journey towards union. The first stage is humility, emptying oneself of one’s ego, or “I-ness,” the sense of being an “achiever.” In this, one is guided by the Son. The second stage is that of mercy or charity, which is reached under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is in this stage that one “recovers” one’s “divine likeness,” since God has created human beings in God’s “image” and “likeness.”⁴⁵ To reach the third and highest level, one needs to be “caught up” (*raptus*) which is effected in it without its co-operation. The state of rapture cannot be sustained permanently as long as we have the “body of flesh.” From there arises the situation of the bride who feels abandoned by the bridegroom and yearns to be reunited. These levels may be compared with the three kinds of kisses. The first stage corresponds to the kiss of the feet; the second, to the kiss of the hand; and the third, to the kiss of the mouth.

⁴²Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship*, 53.

⁴³Sommerfeldt, *Bernard of Clairvaux on the Spirituality of Relationship*, 55.

⁴⁴Cited in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2003, 109. Butler notes that mystics like Ruysbroeck, John of the Cross, etc, too, made use of similes of water, iron, and air to describe the union of the soul with God.

⁴⁵Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit*, trans. Claire Lavoie, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1976, 76.

The final step is the ineffable kiss of the mouth, a gracious condescension of God which ravishes the soul. This kiss is the highest favour a human being can ask for, and represents that real mystical experience in which the soul is united to God. In the spiritual marriage the soul loses all thought of itself. Such ecstasy, doubtless, is only a foretaste of eternal happiness; nevertheless, it gives the enraptured soul the highest degree of bliss which it is capable of sustaining. Bernard's mystical life caused him to experience the reality of Jesus with intensity and in a manner altogether novel for his times.

8.5. Bridal Mysticism and Attitude of the Church

Unlike the general belief, Catholic hierarchy was and is very positive towards this form of mysticism. Not only great mystics arose during her part centuries but also numerous official documents released by the hierarchy bear witness to this truth. Catholic interpreters of the *Song of Songs*, from the third-century theologian Origen onwards, have always understood the bridegroom to represent Christ and the bride to represent all his believers collectively as the Church. It is in the Church that Christ fulfils and reveals his own mystery as the purpose of God's plan: "to unite all things in him." St. Paul calls the nuptial union of Christ and the Church "a great mystery." Because she is united to Christ as to her bridegroom, she becomes a mystery in her turn. (Eph. 5:32; 3:9-11; 5:25-27). Contemplating this mystery in her, Paul exclaims: "Christ in you, the hope of glory."⁴⁶ In the Church, this communion of human beings with God, in the "love [that] never ends," is the purpose which governs everything in her that is a sacramental means, tied to this passing world. "[The Church's] structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members. And holiness is measured according to the 'great mystery' in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom."⁴⁷ Those who are united with Christ will form the community of the redeemed, "the holy city" of God, "the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9). This is explained in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as follows:

The unity of Christ and the Church, head and members of one Body, also implies the distinction of the two within a personal relationship. This aspect is often expressed by the image of bridegroom and bride. The theme of Christ as Bridegroom of the Church was prepared for

⁴⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §772.

⁴⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §773.

by the prophets and announced by John the Baptist. The Lord referred to himself as the “bridegroom.” The Apostle speaks of the whole Church and of each of the faithful, members of his Body, as a bride “betrothed” to Christ the Lord so as to become but one spirit with him. The Church is the spotless bride of the spotless Lamb.⁴⁸

Those who are united with Christ will form the community of the redeemed, “the holy city” of God, “the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” Every Catholic nun in convents around the world is a bride of Christ. They are ritually married to Jesus when they take monastic vows and wear a wedding band to demonstrate their married status. The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes them as consecrated virgins:

Virgins, who, committed to the holy plan of following Christ more closely, are consecrated to God by the diocesan bishop according to the approved liturgical rite, are betrothed mystically to Christ, the Son of God, and are dedicated to the service of the Church. By this solemn rite (*Consecratio virginum*), the virgin is “constituted ... a sacred person, a transcendent sign of the Church’s love for Christ, and an eschatological image of this heavenly Bride of Christ and of the life to come.”⁴⁹

Pope Benedict XVI, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, sheds more light and clarity into this matter:

The Eucharist, as the sacrament of charity, has a particular relationship with the love of man and woman united in marriage. A deeper understanding of this relationship is needed at the present time. Pope John Paul II frequently spoke of the nuptial character of the Eucharist and its special relationship with the sacrament of Matrimony: “The Eucharist is the sacrament of our redemption. It is the sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride.” Moreover, “the entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist.”⁵⁰

Pope John Paul II, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, has clearly underlined the merits of developing this spousal dimension of Catholic spirituality. He says:

⁴⁸*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §796.

⁴⁹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §796.

⁵⁰Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §27.

In the consecrated life, particular importance attaches to the spousal meaning, which recalls the Church’s duty to be completely and exclusively devoted to her Spouse, from whom she receives every good thing. This spousal dimension, which is part of all consecrated life, has a particular meaning for women, who find therein their feminine identity and as it were discover the special genius of their relationship with the Lord.⁵¹

During a General Audience, on March 15, 1995, Pope John Paul II instructed the religious women as to how they are expected to serve the Church and the Lord:

Today spousal mysticism appears less pronounced in young aspirants to the religious life... The service that Jesus came to fulfil ... includes – special fulfilment of the Church’s spousal dimension in union with Christ... According to the Council, the mystery of the Church’s spousal union with Christ is represented in every consecrated life (see LG 44), especially through the profession of the evangelical counsel of chastity (see PC 12). It is understandable that this representation is especially realized in the consecrated woman. To her the title *sponsa Christi* is frequently attributed, even in the liturgical texts. Tertullian applied the image of nuptials with God to men and women without distinction when he wrote: “How many men and women in the ranks of the Church have appealed to continence and preferred to be wedded to God...” But it cannot be denied that the feminine soul has a particular capacity to live in a mystical spousal relationship with Christ and, thus, to reproduce in herself the face and heart of his bride, the Church. This is why, in the rite for the profession of women religious and consecrated virgins in the world, the singing or recitation of the antiphon “*Veni sponsa Christi...*” fills their hearts with intense emotion, enveloping those concerned and the whole assembly in an aura of mysticism.⁵²

9. Conclusion

This essay examined the symbolic and metaphoric uses of sexuality by mystics of various traditions, including Hinduism and Christianity. It clearly indicates that even celibate men and women of contemplative

⁵¹Pope John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, §34.

⁵²www.consecratedvirgins.org/pjp2-b.pdf; www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/audiences/alpha/data/aud19950315en.html, §1.

orders have used imageries based on passionate human love. Instead of condemning sexuality as evil or sinful, they incorporated it into their practices, not physically but symbolically. Christian women religious take their betrothal to Jesus seriously; perfect chastity is an expression of their spousal fidelity to their husband, Jesus Christ. Sublimation of the sex drive is the bedrock of bridal mysticism, not its physical expression. In the view of bridal mystics, chastity is a necessary spiritual, mental, and physical discipline; so is spiritual poverty or kenosis: emptiness of desire and longing. Some aspects of the Catholic priestly vocation too seem distinctly feminine. For example, priests dedicate themselves to serving others, nurturing them spiritually. In fact, Catholic Church places tremendous emphasis on the cultivation of soft, feminine values. This is clearly expressed in the tender beatitudes imparted by Jesus to the faithful gathered at the mount: “Blessed are the meek... Blessed are the merciful... Blessed are the pure in heart... Blessed are the peacemakers...” (Mt. 5:1-11). Both male and female Christians, all who believe, are brides of Christ. The direction for all these must be towards acquiring more feminine characteristics: gentleness, quietness, availability, self-sacrificing spirit, confident, trustful, unquestioning acceptance of everything the Bridegroom decides, etc.

Describing their spiritual practices, some mystics freely employ romantic and sexual metaphors, ranging from subtle symbolisms to highly erotic imageries. Some speak of God as a lover whose presence is anxiously awaited, like a woman languishing in bed as she awaits a sexual encounter with her sweetheart. Others refer to God as a bridegroom who receives his spiritual bride in marriage and possesses her totally. Some even speak of God as a ravisher by whom one is seduced, penetrated by divine love, and filled with bliss. What distinguishes the bridal mysticism from the lustful indulgence in passionate carnal adventures driven and dominated by instinct could be summarized as follows: While the brute passion for carnal gratification is nothing but wild, tempestuous, self-centred, possessive, blind, partial, jealous, fearful of betrayal, etc., the bridal love is gentle, romantic, self-sacrificing, total, confident, trustful, caring, all leading to a lifelong deliberate course of action that begets peace, joy, and celebration.