

Renata ALEXANDRE

# Is Sexuality Sacred? A Biblical Connection

*The Christian Church has been in an uneasy relationship with sexuality nearly since her inception. In such a context, affirming sexuality is extremely difficult. The Biblical record does not appear to affirm human sexuality either. Yet, there is some evidence to affirm human sexuality in the Biblical text if we examine the ancient Hebrew way of knowing, which is deeply psychological and geared toward community.*

## Paradigm for 'Knowing'

The ancient Hebrew way of 'knowing' is always moving forward. It is a process in which three movements can be perceived: differentiation, recognition, and community. First, the ancient Hebrew mind, to understand a given problem, must sense what information is discrepant. The individual wishes to hear and see personally the discrepant information. Once differences have been determined, similarities are seen, and may outnumber the differences between individuals. Finally, in recognizing similarities, the Hebrew mind invites the other person into community, for within that other individual the work of God is detected. The Hebrew way of 'knowing' is a holistic, personal movement in which all the senses are used.

Using this paradigm for 'knowing', the Genesis creation story can be interpreted in a way that embraces sexuality. The Hebrew understanding of how humans relate with each other gives us clues to what Hebrew Biblical writers may have actually meant when they state that Adam 'knew' Eve, or that Abraham 'knew' Sarah. Their 'knowing' involved far more than sexual intercourse and an ensuing conception of a child. Indeed, the ancient Hebrew way of 'knowing' was deeply relational and took a great deal of personal interaction to develop.

Furthermore, the Hebrew world-view has biological as well as psychological and social implications for relational growth. Indeed, 'to know' can occur only with the promise of a future within a relationship. This expectation yields a community of relationships as the members of a couple make known to their families and friends their intention of a future together, or as they themselves begin to form

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their own community through bearing offspring. Without such a promise of a communal relationship and the input that new people bring to their lives, 'knowing' becomes stagnant.

Finally, by comparing sexual trauma with fulfilling forms of sexuality, we observe how our sexuality has a direct effect on the mind, body and soul of an individual. In a sexual relationship without 'knowing,' partners fail to have empathy for one another because they do not perceive the other's viewpoint, which leads to controversy, disgust and sometimes violence.

### The Hebrew World-view

The Biblical account in Genesis 2 illustrates three movements in the Hebrew way of 'knowing' through the creation story. Phyllis TRIBLE gives a detailed account of the *differentiation* of female and male from the "earth creature" who was created in Genesis 2:7. This earth creature was asexual until God took Adam's rib and created a female human being. This differentiation was not simply a dividing up of parts: the female gets the ovaries, uterus, vagina and breasts and the male gets the penis, testicles and big muscles. The Hebrew way of thinking does not simply mean a differentiation of parts; it means all the related issues regarding the development of male and female from birth to adulthood — it is a process, not an event. The narrator of this story wanted to reveal the very essence of what it means to be a human being, not a mechanical separation as would occur when surgeons divide babies who are conjoined at birth.

The earth creature was not the same after the creation of woman. Though he was not re-created, he was forever changed by the advent of sexuality into his world. He was no longer an earth creature but had become a man. For TRIBLE, in this moment Adam first became conscious of himself as a man through seeing another like him with whom to celebrate the mutuality of life. Psychologically, humans are unaware of their sexuality until they recognize in another person not simply an outward difference, but also an inward similarity.

Further, this act of God shows that humanity was not made to be in solitude; humans were meant to be in *community* with one another. Adam recognized Eve as another human being with whom to share the work, joy, trials and celebrations. He did not recognize a particular person; he 'knew' another human being. When we look at other humans, we are to 'know' them as other beings with a similar life plan to ours: we are born, we grow, we form relationships, we work, and we die.

Finally, in the Hebrew way of 'knowing,' a true partnership is not a contract for cohabitation. In Genesis 2:24, the narrator uses the Hebrew word *dabhaq*, meaning "cleave." This word is used to indicate strong love, unbreakable trust and faithful companionship. Such love includes sexual intercourse, but is not bound by it. This type of love is a process: it is enduring, faithful, honest and true. Cultivated over a lifetime, the partners in this deeply intimate relationship wish to become one. Sexual intercourse, with its momentary unity, cannot achieve such fulfillment in a relationship. This partnership is one of desire and passion for all that the partners can express to one another in their everyday lives and growth,

and it also includes all those wishes and dreams that they do not have the words to express. Carter HEYWARD says: “[Creation processes] do not refer to separate moments or events in either human or divine life. They signal sacred process. They signal relational empowerment, which is at once creative and liberating, sensual and sacred.” Such relationships do not happen in just a few days or years; they take a lifetime.

An implication embedded in the Hebrew creation myth is that humanity is not one until all people can come together in harmony and ‘know’ each other as “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.” One person is an example of humanity, and all human beings together are a fuller, more complete definition of what it means to be human. Real ‘knowing’ is opening ourselves to the possibility of being changed by another person.

Because humans are created to be social creatures, in order to ‘know’ one another, we are always searching for the harmonious community of all the earth’s peoples. This is why heaven is so compelling. We dream for that harmonious place where there is no worry, no conflict, no sorrow, no cares, and where there is a relational ‘knowing’ of ourselves and others that we cannot find on earth. However, in that kind of world there is also little or no growth, because there is no impetus for change and growth: without new ideas coming into relationships, stagnation occurs.

The affirmation of persons who ‘know’ an individual and her or his talents is a necessary part of that person’s ability to grow and become the person she or he was created by God to become. This includes the realm of sexuality and sex life. It is through a satisfying, passionate sex life that we come face to face with our partner; our knowledge of our partner and our self momentarily merges and mingles to change us.

### **Relationship of Knowledge and Power**

The biologically-rooted differentiation and separation of the genders in Genesis is the same differentiation noted above. Paradoxically, the differentiation of male from female also produced a desire for unity. This desire for integration is seen in the biological processes that influence the sexual and social behavior of human beings.

The ancient Hebrew process of creation continues today. God needs humanity to continue the life of humans in the world. Through procreation, humans become co-creators with God: thus, God’s command to go forth and multiply. Through the biological processes involved in procreation, human beings are drawn toward one another. Sexual desire leads to jealousy, which leads to influence of another’s desires and control of another’s activities. This is where power becomes involved.

The underlying issue in the control of another person is that of power. One who has power also has choice. A woman’s sexual power lies in her ability to make sexual choices, and female orgasm is the ultimate expression of a woman’s sexual

power As humans begin to desire one another, they spend more time with each other. If a sufficient amount of time has not been spent building a basic foundation of trust, the inability to place one's faith fully in another person becomes problematic. Manipulation and control of the other person become more and more common and 'knowing' becomes relegated to controlling.

Michel FOUCAULT, in *The History of Sexuality*, documents the gradual use of sexuality for power rather than for relationships in which 'knowing' is primary. Sex and sexuality become central to social and political power when they are used in an attempt to repress sexuality in lower social classes and to encourage sexuality in elite classes. Such attempts at exploitation and control place a sexual barrier between genders as well as classes. The desire for power is not conducive to ancient Hebrew 'knowing.' Indeed, power can preclude such intimacy at every level of life and being.

We render a great deal of power to our sexuality, for it connects our bodies and minds, making embodied experience intelligible for us. FOUCAULT depicts our sexuality as that which has become more important than our souls. Our history does not depict a sexuality that is a 'knowing' such as the ancient Hebrew mind-set might describe. Yet, there are currently instances of our recognition of sex as wholeness.

*Effective egalitarian power* requires a *differentiation* between females and males, rather than a barrier placed between them. Instead of seeing partners as a threat to our power, we must see each other as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." The failure to 'know' causes an inability for members of a couple to sense the work of the sacred between and among them as they move throughout their daily lives. Egalitarian power must be shared, not hoarded by one member of the partnership. Failure to share power places energy in keeping one's power intact rather than allowing energy to flow freely from one person to the other.

In focusing on male sexuality, James NELSON discusses relational power that is shared between partners. It is a power that is integrated, just as the ancient Hebrews integrate the differentiated bodies of male and female through the desire for unity. He states, "People are enhanced by this kind of power, mystery is affirmed, interdependence is celebrated." NELSON also affirms that the 'knowing' relationship constitutes an opening of the self to another to allow influence by one's partner, which affirms one's own integrity and freedom through experiencing and being experienced by another. He states, "The world of the individual who can be influenced by another without losing his/her identity or freedom is larger than the world of the individual who fears being influenced." NELSON is talking about *recognition* of one another.

For many individuals, such recognition occurs in orgasm. Mary PELLAUER discusses orgasm as an experience of universal proportions. She states, "Orgasm is a gift I receive *from my own body*. My very flesh has this capacity to burst me open to existence, to melt me down into a state in which my connections to the rest of the universe are not only felt, but felt as extremely pleasurable, as joyous." Carter HEYWARD and Beverly HARRISON see the potential of sexuality and sex as enhanc-

ing and deepening one's relations with one's partner and in the world. These examples of human sexuality speak of wholeness in the presence of individuality, freedom in the context of relationships and interdependence within partnership, which tend toward an ancient Hebrew way of 'knowing' in relationships. They also speak to the dreams individuals have for their relationships and the future of humanity. They speak of an ideal *community* where power relationships are shared and people are seen for who they are: other humans who are also "flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones."

### **'To Know' in Community**

"To know" is not to 'know' just for ourselves, it is to 'know' in community. Christine GUDORF discusses sexual intercourse as an expression of community: intercourse does not merely express or symbolize love, express or symbolize intimacy with God. It *is* love. It is Trinitarian intimacy, our intimacy with the three divine persons. That is what many of the references to sex as experiences of heaven mean to convey. It is this spiritual or religious sense that persons try to capture in more secular language about the merger of two human hearts, or the ultimate experience of human freedom.

To love in community is to work for the happiness and health of all humanity. Justice and compassion must be a part of the community of love. Carter HEYWARD quotes Dorothee SÖLLE regarding these truths: "God is both the *act* of justicemaking/lovemaking and *those* who struggle for justice for themselves and others." This type of love, 'knowing,' is always changing as the context of our lives changes while always rearranging ideals as necessary. We continually work for ourselves and the other toward a relational power within our community.

When the Hebrew way of 'knowing' is not present within one's relationships, one feels vulnerable when maintaining community while also being true to one's beliefs. Yet, the apostle Paul calls us to balance individuality and community in such a manner as Kathy RUDY points out: "This uniting with other souls that disrupts our isolation and individualism does not just take place during sex; it is the cornerstone of Christian community. The Bible calls us over and over to surrender our individualistic selves in order to become part of the Body of Christ."

Communal love encompasses faithful service while remaining true to one's own beliefs, experiences, and knowledge of the world, and most of all, it means being true to oneself. Such unity in community requires 'knowing' each other as human beings who are different from us: they come from different social backgrounds, they have had different experiences, they have different talents and gifts than we do, and they choose to live their lives differently, but they are still "flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones."

### **Relationships without 'Knowing': Sexual Trauma**

Let us examine what occurs when relationships do not adhere to the ancient Hebrew way of 'knowing.' The relationships of the abused and battered are not relationships in which the victim and perpetrator really 'know' one another in the

intimate sense discussed above. The result of such traumatic transactions is the fragmentation of the self. For our purposes, it is the separation of the soul, sexuality and psyche from one another. Such relationships actually perform the opposite function to that of the ancient Hebrew mind-set. These relationships do not see the other as “flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones.” This form of relationship must be sharply distinguished from relationships in which individuals ‘know’ one another intimately in knowledge, sensuality and intuitiveness.

When an individual is abused sexually, her or his soul and spirit is crushed. This is especially evident for those who are oppressed in other ways. For example, racial minorities, women and victims who are poor or disabled are traumatized doubly when they are sexually abused because they live in a world that minimizes them as an individual. Rape or sexual abuse adds to such trauma by *dis-integrating* their sense of who they are and by shattering their souls. Rape is fragmenting for a relatively unified individual, but for one who is already fragmented by other oppressions, rape is a soul-crushing blow to what wholeness these people have been able to find within themselves.

Judith HERMAN has researched trauma and its impact on victims. She writes that humans have a natural ability to assimilate new events into their psyches in order to adapt their consciousness to new behavior. In trauma this ability fails, shattering the internal mechanisms of the psyche and inducing a failure to adapt. Long after the event, particularly of rape, survivors feel as though there is a part of them that has died. Professionals verify that the first part of the self to be lost is the soul, and in recovery, it is the last to return *if* ever it does. Rape survivors report more suicidal behavior, more suicidal thoughts, and more psychological dysfunction than any other group of people who survive such terrorizing trauma.

Children who have been sexually abused have grave difficulties with intimacy and trust. Often they have a skewed idea about what it means to be sexual and about the normality of aggression in relationships. Battered women and children suffer similar traumas, which with repeated abuse have the effect of re-forming and deforming the personality. Living in a world of terror without options for change affects victims by leaving them with a sense of helplessness. The victim accepts her or his fate as the price she or he must pay to maintain this faulty relationship.

Unlike those who suffer abuse, individuals able to adopt the Hebrew way of ‘knowing’ find it conducive to awareness, not only of the other person in one’s relationship, but also of the culture and its messages embedded deep in one’s psyche. Such ‘knowing’ drives itself deep into the consciousness and affirms each individual of her or his self worth, healing the schisms that a fragmenting culture initiates. This way of ‘knowing’ is healing and self-affirming, and enlarges one’s world. This way of ‘knowing’ is sacred.

### **‘To Know’ in Sexual Intercourse and Orgasm**

Emerging from ‘knowing’ another person deeply is the awareness of the sacred. There is a sense of dancing with the community of the self and its intimate other in the presence of the Trinity. The presence of God empowers us to be and

become who we are created to be. Carter HEYWARD also refers to the power that such 'knowing' suggests: "Our power draws us into our beginnings – into the heart of our creation and creativity, into our relatedness [where] we participate in liberating one another from the isolation, brokenness and despair wrought by abusive power relations in the great and small places of our lives."

We return to our intimate others to regain the power and the strength we need in order to continue growing to become the best we can be. We wish to immerse ourselves in relationships that we recognize empower us; and being true to ourselves and our intimate others, we touch our own souls as we touch others intimately.

'Knowing' in this way is not a human creation; it is a gift from God that allows for just relationships among human beings. Indeed, regardless of who may be the lovers, the root of the love is sacred movement between and among us. This love is agapic, philial and erotic. It is God's love and, insofar as we embody and express it, it is ours.

Created in God's image, we embody a spark of God within each of us. As we *recognize* within each other that spark or image of God, we also recognize the potential the other has to offer us in wisdom, empowerment and connectedness. It is ours, yet it is not wholly ours, for it represents something much larger than any one of us is capable of imagining — not only psychologically, but also sexually. God created human beings with the capability to have and give one another sexual pleasure. Such pleasure is enhanced by real 'knowing' as can be seen in orgasm.

Joan H. TIMMERMAN describes the experience of orgasm this way: "The ecstatic moment recreates the personality as well as introducing new insights, inventions and lives into the universe. When the boundaries re-form, it is never with quite the same configuration as before." Most of the time we erect boundaries to protect ourselves from too much stimulation or the wrong type of stimulation, but during orgasm those boundaries are momentarily let down and we are completely open to our lover.

This moment is the most conscious moment that our communion with our lover and with God is recognized. Many other times we unconsciously recognize or sense the importance of the moment, but during orgasm it becomes most evident to our conscious minds. For Mary PELLAUER, it is not simply letting her lover and God into who she is or allowing herself to enter into them; she becomes one with the world. This is the sort of community to which the Hebrew world was referring when the author of Genesis said that Adam 'knew' Eve. It is a sense of *community* with God, each other and the world, which empowers all involved and also inspires care and concern for the growth of the other.

Orgasm has the potential of changing our attitudes toward the entire world. GUDORF explains it this way: Orgasm often demands a kind of conscious, deliberate letting-go of control over oneself and one's reactions, a willingness to immerse oneself in the sensation. The pleasure which washes over us when we surrender to the experience and let go of control reinforces the lesson that it is OK, even good, to let go of control, to open oneself up to other people and experiences, to let down the protective barriers of our self-consciousness. When sex is not segregat-



ed from the rest of our lives, the pleasure of orgasm can reach far beyond the moment of intense pleasure itself, and change, a little at a time, the way we relate to our partner, and even to the larger society and the world. It can encourage us to trust more, to be willing to risk more, to reach out to others more.

It is risky to abandon oneself in this way. Sexuality and true 'knowing' of another become so hazardous as to be life-threatening for some people. Those who do not understand sexuality as a gift likely find it a burden with which they must live. However, according to the Christian community, we are called to live in such a way as to 'know' others in as complete a way as possible.

Kathy RUDY explains modern Christian community this way: "Such unitivity entails risks of rejection, abandonment and loss. Once we venture outside ourselves and locate life's meaning in the souls of others, we are no longer in control of our own destiny. Sexuality is a form of vulnerability and ought to be valued as such. Sex, eros, passion are antidotes to the human sin of wanting to be in control or have power over another. Thus, in unitivity, we overcome our desires to control both our own lives and the lives of other individuals in favor of a more organic representation of humanity. Unitivity is the understanding that we are never alone and that we are always produced by, in and for a social context."

To be known is to open oneself to share and give to one another. This is not the same as what is currently demanded of females in many societies today: a demand that women have their being for others. Rather, it is a demand that in our relationships we give because we want to give, and we receive without guilt or feeling a necessity to reciprocate. It is a demand to come to relationships as we are, sharing who we are with one another as best we can, remaining open and vulnerable to each other as we feel comfortable. It is the willingness to be changed by the other person.

## **Affirming Sexuality**

The ancient Hebrew process of 'knowing' differentiates life courses while it continues to seek wholeness and integrity for humanity. Indeed, sexuality is a good gift of God, and it is meant for humanity to enjoy. Sex and sexuality are about being embodied persons who are similar but different, and who are meant to be in community.

The phenomenon that brings people together in a true 'knowing,' a real sense of truly understanding, caring, loving and sensing the particular uniqueness of another person, is their embodied sexuality. A true recognition of another as "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" is the primary component to such familiarity.

True 'knowing' is a life-long process in which people in relationship engage. It takes hard work, much compassion, and an ability to see the image of God in another person. The Hebrew world sees true 'knowing' as a way of being or becoming. It celebrates the growth and change of individuals as they become the people they were created by God to be.

**Suggested Reading**

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**Renata ALEXANDRE:****La sexualité est-elle sacrée? Connexion biblique**

Historiquement, l'Église chrétienne a eu une relation difficile avec la sexualité, une observation de la linguistique biblique, cependant, nous donne des indications sur comment les anciens Hébreux pouvaient avoir vraiment vu la sexualité. Ces observations coïncident avec la pensée de plusieurs écrivains contemporains. L'article propose un lien linguistique possible entre les compréhensions contemporaines de la sexualité chrétienne et la manière de l'Hébreux ancien de la *connaissance* trouvée dans la Genèse. Cette interprétation de la sexualité biblique ne suggère pas seulement que la sexualité est un bon don de Dieu, mais aussi qu'un manquement dans le partage de notre sexualité avec une personne aimée constitue un manquement de vivre nos potentialités comme constructeurs et chercheurs de la justice.

**Renata ALEXANDRE:****¿La sexualidad es sagrada? Una conexión bíblica**

Históricamente la Iglesia Cristiana ha tenido una relación nada fácil con la sexualidad. Sin embargo, la observación de la lingüística bíblica, nos proporciona pistas sobre cómo los antiguos hebreos pudieron haber visto realmente la sexualidad. Estas observaciones coinciden con el pensamiento de muchos escritores contemporáneos. El artículo propone un posible nexo lingüístico entre la comprensión contemporánea de la sexualidad cristiana, y la antigua forma hebrea de "entenderle" encontrada en Génesis. Esta interpretación de la sexualidad bíblica no sólo sugiere que la sexualidad es un buen regalo de Dios, sino que también el fallar en compartir nuestra sexualidad con nuestros seres amados, constituye una falla en el vivir al máximo nuestro potencial como buscadores y hacedores de la justicia.