

Eros and Tradition: The Challenge of the Colorless Rainbow

By Mateus Soares de Azevedo

Is there a traditional view concerning sexuality? If so, how should one approach sexual love from the perspective of the universal and perennial wisdom? What are the substantive differences in approach between ordinary theology, or exoteric religion, and esoterism, concerning this topic? Is sexuality a “physical need”? Is it only for procreation, as common theology says? Or is there a deeper dimension to sex that makes it amenable to a spiritual understanding? How should one distinguish the “orthodox” from the “heretical”? In this regard, how should one characterize the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and its consequences in the present day? And what can one make of monosexuality, non-compulsory celibacy and polygamy? These are a few of the issues that we propose to address from a Perennialist point of view.

Sex and its Relation to the Spirit

As an almost unavoidable dimension of human existence, sexuality should not be excluded from the domain of traditional spirituality. One says “almost” because not every man or woman is necessarily required to participate in this dimension. It is a mistake to claim that sex is a “physical need”. It is not. If it were so, there would be no voluntary celibates, in both genders—bearing in mind that voluntary celibacy exists among all peoples and cultures in the world. Even Lutheranism, which in the sixteenth century rejected priestly celibacy—Luther maintained that the normal state of men and women is marriage—, has a small order of Protestant nuns. Let us say then that sexual love constitutes a greater and wider need (psychological, emotional, or spiritual) than a merely physical

one. But, since, in man, the borders between the physical, the affective, and the spiritual dimensions are not watertight, and are not absolutely separated, one can say that it is a psycho-physical and spiritual need.

As for the Catholic world, which compulsorily requires celibacy of priests, monks, and nuns, the practice of celibacy was imposed by Pope Gregory VII only in the eleventh century. This means that the Christian world, both East and West, had for over a thousand years a very different practice, with priests allowed to marry and raise families. It is worth noting that the papal decision of mandatory celibacy found huge opposition and could only be implemented over the years with a stiff resistance in many places throughout Europe. Priestly celibacy, moreover, is not a dogma, but an ecclesiastical discipline—which means that it can be modified. On the other hand, in Eastern Christianity, including some Catholic denominations of the Oriental rite, such as the Melkites, priests can be married if established in the East (bishops and monks are necessarily celibate). The Eastern Church practice seems to be more realistic and balanced, and thereby does not lead to an abrupt separation between the clergy and laity. Far from intensifying a division, the married priest becomes then a kind of “bridge” between the two domains. It is better for society to have a good married priest than a bad celibate priest.

As Frithjof Schuon has noted¹, sex is a natural function and an important aspect of man. According to the traditional esoteric perspective, sexual love, within the moral parameters of a traditional civilization, can be seen as “naturally supernatural,” as Schuon observed—“naturally supernatural,” in an esoteric sense, but certainly not according to the exoteric perspective, which is characteristically penitential and ascetic, and looks upon sexuality with suspicion, having no interest in probing its more spiritual and profound dimensions. Schuon notes: “In the primordial man, sexual ecstasy coincides with spiritual ecstasy. It communicates to man an experience of mystical union with the Divine, a ‘remembrance’ or reminiscence of divine Love, of which human love is a distant reflection; an ambiguous reflection, certainly, since the image is at one and the same time both adequate and inverted.”²

¹ Frithjof Schuon, ‘The Problem of Sexuality’ in *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, Perennial Books, 1981, p. 129.

² *Ibid.* p. 129

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