

# The Problem of Sexuality

by

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*Editor's note: The following is a recent translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon. The essay has appeared in the books Esoterism as Principle and as Way (Perennial Books, 1981), and The Essential Frithjof Schuon (World Wisdom, 2005).*

It would be impossible for the spiritual life in itself to exclude a domain as fundamental, humanly speaking, as sexuality; sex is an aspect of man. Traditionally the West is marked by a theology of Augustinian inspiration, which explains marriage from a more or less utilitarianist angle, while neglecting the intrinsic reality of the thing. According to this perspective—leaving aside every apologetic euphemism—sexual union in itself is sin; consequently the child is born in sin, but the Church compensates, or rather more than compensates, for this evil with a greater good, namely baptism, faith, sacramental life. According to the primordial perspective, on the other hand, which is founded on the intrinsic nature of the realities concerned, the sexual act is a “naturally supernatural” sacrament. In primordial man sexual ecstasy coincides with spiritual ecstasy, it communicates to man an experience of mystical union, a “remembrance” of the 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. It is in this ambiguity that the whole problem resides: the primitive, “pagan”, Greco-Hindu perspective—a *de facto* esoteric perspective in the Christian context—is based on the adequateness of the image, for a tree reflected in water is still a tree and not something else; the Christian, penitential, ascetical and in fact exoteric perspective is on the contrary based on the inversion of the image, for a tree has its branches above and not below, and the reflection is thus no longer the tree. But there is a great disparity between the two points of view; while esoterism accepts the relative and conditional justice of the penitential perspective, this perspective is unable in its turn to accept the legitimacy of the “natural”, primordial and participative perspective; and this is exactly the reason why the latter cannot but be “esoteric” in an Augustinian context, although in itself it may nevertheless be integrated into an exoterism, as is proved, for example, by Islam.<sup>1</sup>

In a Christian atmosphere, sexuality in itself, isolated from every distorting context, readily acquires the opprobrium of “bestiality”, whereas in reality nothing that is human is bestial by its

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<sup>1</sup> Islam being in this respect even more explicit than Judaism.

nature; that is why we are men and not beasts. Nevertheless, in order to escape from the animality in which we participate, it is necessary that our attitudes should be integrally human, in accordance with the norm imposed upon us by our deformity; they must embrace both our soul and our spirit, or in other words, devotion and truth. Moreover, it is only the blind passion of fallen men that is bestial, and not the innocent sexuality of the animals; when man is reduced to his animality, he becomes worse than the animals, who betray no vocation and violate no norm; we must not implicate the animal, which may be a noble creature, in the taboos and anathemas of human moralism.

If the sexual act were by its nature a sin—as basically the Christian and penitential perspective would have it<sup>2</sup>—this nature would be transmitted to the child that is conceived in it; if on the contrary the sexual act represents, through its profound and spiritually integral nature, an act that is meritorious because in principle sanctifying<sup>3</sup>—or a primordial sacrament evoking and actualizing in the required conditions a union with God,—the child that is conceived according to this nature will be hereditarily predisposed to spiritual union, no more and no less than he would be predisposed to sin in the contrary case; the fact that the act by itself is *de jure* if not *de facto* a sort of sacrament implies, moreover, that the child is a gift, and not the sole goal of the act.<sup>4</sup>

The Church blesses marriage with a view to the procreation of men, of whom it will make believers; it blesses it while taking upon itself the inevitable but provisional drawback of the “sin of the flesh”. We are tempted to say that it is here nearer to St Paul than to Christ; in other words, St Paul, without inventing anything—which is out of the question—nevertheless accentuated things with a view to a particular application which was not necessary in itself. Unquestionably, Christ indicated the way of abstinence; but abstinence does not necessarily signify that the sexual act is sinful by nature; it may signify on the contrary that sinners profane it; for in sexual union sinners rob God of the enjoyment which belongs to him. Seen from this angle, the sin of Adam consisted in monopolizing enjoyment—in attributing to himself enjoyment as such, so that the fault lay both in the theft and in the manner of envisaging the object of the theft, namely a pleasure that is substantially divine. Thus his sin was to usurp the place of God while withdrawing from the divine subjectivity in which man participated at the origin; it was to cease to participate in this divine subjectivity and to make himself absolute subject. The human

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<sup>2</sup> No doubt this perspective is not exclusively Christian, but we want to deal with it here in its best known form.

<sup>3</sup> This is related to the fact that in several traditional worlds the sexual act of the prince is reputed to fertilize, through the woman, the soil of the country, or to increase the prosperity of the people.

<sup>4</sup> If the sexual act is a double-edged sword that can give rise to totally opposite eschatological consequences, depending on the objective and subjective conditions that accompany it, it may call to mind, *mutatis mutandis*, the sacraments which, in the absence of the required conditions, result not in grace but in condemnation.

subject, by practically making himself God, at the same stroke limited and degraded the object of his happiness and even the whole cosmic ambience.

Obviously, in the intention of Christ, there could not simply have been a desire not to see a natural and primordial sacrament profaned; there was also, and even above all, the offering of a spiritual means congenial to an ascetical perspective, for chastity is necessarily the ferment of a way, given precisely the ambiguity of sexual things. At Cana, Christ consecrated or blessed marriage, without one being able to say that he did so from the Pauline or Augustinian angle: he changed the water into wine, which is an eloquent symbolism, and which refers with much more probability to the possibility of a union that is both carnal and spiritual than to the moral and social opportunism of the theologians; if it was a question of an exclusively carnal union, it would indeed no longer be human.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, if procreation is such an important thing, it is impossible that the act which is its *conditio sine qua non* should be a regrettable accident, and that this act should not, on the contrary, possess a sacred character proportionate to the importance and holiness of procreation itself. And if it is possible to isolate—as do the theologians—procreation from the sexual act by stressing only the former, it must be equally possible to isolate the sexual act from procreation by accentuating the act alone in conformity with its own nature and its immediate context; this amounts to saying that love possesses a quality that makes it independent of its purely biological and social aspect, as moreover its theological and mystical symbolism proves.

One can procreate without loving, and one can love without procreating; the love of Jacob for Rachel does not lose its meaning because Rachel was for a long time sterile, and the Song of Solomon does not seek to justify itself by any demographic considerations.

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Without any doubt, Christ was not opposed to marriage, nor was he, perhaps, opposed to polygamy either; the parable of the ten virgins seems to bear witness to this.<sup>6</sup> In the Christian world, polygamy should have been permitted to princes, if not to all believers; many wars and many tyrannical pressures on the Church would have been avoided—amongst others, the Anglican schism. Man must not put asunder what God has joined together, Christ said when

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<sup>5</sup> When the Church teaches that Mary was ‘conceived without sin’, this refers to the fact that her soul was created without the stain of original sin; but many uninstructed believers think that this attribute refers to the extraordinary manner of her conception, realized without carnal union on the part of her parents—according to a tradition—or at least without desire or enjoyment in their union, and so without “concupiscence”. If this interpretation is not theological, its existence is nevertheless significant, for such a sentiment is typical of the Christian perspective.

<sup>6</sup> In adding “and of the bride”, by way of providing an explanation, the parable loses if not all of its meaning, at least much of its force...

condemning divorce; the marriages of princes, however, were for the most part the result of political bargaining, which has nothing to do with God, any more than it has to do with love. Polygamy, like monogamy, rests on natural factors: if monogamy is normal because the first marriage was of necessity monogamous and because femininity, like virility, resides entirely in a single person, then polygamy for its part is explained, on the one hand, by the biological facts and by social or political opportuneness—at least in certain societies—and on the other hand by the fact that the infinitude which woman represents permits a diversity of aspects; man prolongs himself towards the periphery, which liberates, just as woman roots herself in the center, which protects.<sup>7</sup> To this it should be added, leaving aside all considerations of opportuneness, that the more or less Nordic peoples tend to favor monogamy, and this for obvious reasons of climate and temperament, whereas the majority of southern peoples seem to have a natural tendency towards polygamy, whatever be its form or degree. Be that as it may, it was an error, in the West, to impose on a whole continent a morality for monks: a morality that is perfectly legitimate in its methodic context, but which is nevertheless based on the error—as regards its extension to the whole of society—that sexuality is a kind of evil; an evil that should be reduced to a minimum and tolerated only by virtue of an approach that leaves out all that is essential.

No doubt a distinction should be made between a polygamy in which several women keep their personality, and a princely “pantogamy” in which a multitude of women represent femininity in a quasi-impersonal manner; the latter would be an affront to the dignity of human persons if it were not founded on the idea that a given bridegroom is situated at the summit of human kind. Pantogamy is possible because Krishna is Vishnu, because David and Solomon are prophets, because the sultan is the “shadow of *Allah* on earth”; it could also be said that the innumerable and anonymous harem has a function analogous to that of the imperial throne adorned with precious stones; a function that is analogous but not identical, for the throne made of human substance—the harem, that is—indicates in an eminently more direct and more concrete manner the real or borrowed divinity of the monarch. At a profane level, this pantogamy would not be possible; as to whether it is legitimate or excusable in any particular case, this is a question that can be settled only on the basis of the distinction between the individual, who may be commonplace, and the function, which is sublime and may on that account attenuate human disproportions and illusions.

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<sup>7</sup> Polyandry, on the other hand, finds no support in the facts of nature; extremely rare, it is doubtless to be explained by very special economic reasons and perhaps also by concepts proper to shamanism. There is also the case of sacred prostitution—hetaerae, hierodules, *devadadasis*, geishas—in which woman becomes the center because she gives herself to a number of men; we are compelled to admit that this phenomenon is a possibility within the framework of archaic traditions, but it is at all events excluded from the later religions, apart from a few exceptions, which however are too marginal to merit explicit mention.

We have written the foregoing in order to explain existing phenomena and not to express preferences or their opposite; our personal sensibility is not at issue and may even be opposed to a particular moral or social solution, of which nevertheless we have sought to demonstrate the justification from a given point of view or in a given context.

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A very important possibility that must be taken into account here is abstinence within the framework of marriage; this moreover goes hand in hand with the virtues of detachment and generosity, which are the essential conditions for the sacramentalization of sexuality. Nothing is more opposed to the sacred than tyranny or triviality on the plane of conjugal relations; abstinence, the breaking of habits and freshness of soul are indispensable elements of any sacred sexuality. In a permanent confrontation of two beings, there must be two equilibrium-producing openings, one towards heaven and the other on earth itself: there must be an opening towards God, who is the third element above the two spouses, without which the duality would become opposition; and there must be an opening or a void—a ventilation, so to speak—on the immediate human plane, and this is abstinence, which is both a sacrifice before God and a homage of respect and gratitude towards the spouse. For the human and spiritual dignity of the spouse demands that he or she should not become a habit, should not be treated in a way that lacks imagination and freshness, and should thus keep his or her mystery; this condition demands not only abstinence, but also, and above all, loftiness of character, which is the last analysis results from our sense of the sacred or from our state of devotion.

Devotion, in fact, demands on the one hand separative respect and on the other hand participative intimacy; on the one hand one must extinguish oneself and remain poor, and on the other hand one must radiate or give; whence the complementarity of detachment and generosity. And in this context it is necessary to stress that the patient and charitable comprehension of the spouse's physical temperament is a condition not only of human dignity but also of the spiritual value of the marriage; periodical abstinence being, precisely, an expression of this comprehension or of this tolerance.<sup>8</sup>

In order not to omit any possibility, we must even consider the case, no doubt rare but in no wise illegitimate in itself, where this abstinence is definitive and where the ideal of a brother-and-sister relationship is combined with that of chastity;<sup>9</sup> in such a case, the tone will not be that of a pedantic or tormented moralism, but that of holy childhood. Obviously Platonic marriage presupposes rather special vocational qualifications, at the same time as a spiritual point of view

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<sup>8</sup> It may be noted that the Redskins saw in sexual abstinence, to which they were sometimes constrained for practical reasons, a sign of strength and consequently of superior virility.

<sup>9</sup> The marriage of Ramakrishna offers us an example of this. The Paramahansa worshiped his wife without touching her; which is of infinitely greater worth than touching her without worshiping her.

which supports this solution, in conformity with the words from Genesis “It is not good that man should be alone; I shall make for him a helpmeet like unto him.”<sup>10</sup>

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Certainly the flesh was cursed by the fall, but only in a certain respect, that of existential and formal discontinuity, not in respect of spiritual and essential continuity. The same remark applies to the natural form, that of the creature: the human body, male or female, is a theophany, and remains so in spite of the fall;<sup>11</sup> by loving one another, the spouses legitimately love a divine manifestation, each one according to a different aspect and in a different respect; the divine content of nobility, goodness and beauty remaining the same. It is by basing itself on this relationship that Islam, on the one hand implicitly recognizes the sacred character of sexuality in itself, and on the other hand—by way of consequence—considers that every child is born *muslim* and that it is its parents who make of it an infidel, if so be the case.

Christian theology, by concerning itself with sin and seeing a seductress in Eve in particular and in woman in general, has been led to evaluate the feminine sex with a maximum of pessimism. According to some, it is man alone and not woman who was made in the image of God, whereas the Bible affirms, not only that God created man in his image, but also that “male and female created He them”, which has been misinterpreted with much ingenuity. In principle, one might be surprised at this lack of more or less visual intelligence on the part of the theologians; in fact, such a limitation has nothing surprising about it, given the will-bound and sentimental character of the exoterist perspective in general, which disposes it to prejudices and bias.<sup>12</sup> A first proof— if proof be needed—that woman is divine image like man, is that in fact she is a human being like him; she is not *vir* or *andros*, but like him she is *homo* or *anthropos*; her form is human and consequently divine. Another proof—but a glance ought to suffice—resides in the fact that, in relation to man and on the erotic plane, woman assumes an almost divine function—similar to the one which man assumes in relation to woman—which would be impossible if she did not incarnate, not the quality of absoluteness, to be sure, but the

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<sup>10</sup> This is also translated as “who will be a match for him” or “who will be worthy of him”; this passage, if one takes the trouble to understand it, rules out the pious misogyny and the holy unthinkingness of some exegetes.

<sup>11</sup> “Whoever has seen me, has seen God”: this *hadith* applies first and foremost to the avataric person, but it applies equally—with obvious reservations—to the human form as such; in this case it is not a question of “such and such a man”, but of “man as such”.

<sup>12</sup> It may be objected that the doctors were inspired by the Holy Spirit; without doubt, but this interpretation is conditional in advance, if one may express it thus, for water takes on the color of its recipient. The Holy Spirit excludes intrinsic error and error that is harmful to the soul, but not necessarily every error that is extrinsic and opportune and thus in practice neutral as regards essential truth and salvation.

complementary quality of infinitude; the Infinite being in a certain fashion the *shakti* of the Absolute.

And this leads us, in order to rectify the excessively unilateral opinions to which the question of the sexes has given rise, to define three relationships which govern the equilibrium between man and woman: firstly the sexual, biological, psychological and social relationship; then the simply human and fraternal relationship, and finally the properly spiritual or sacred relationship. In the first relationship, there is obviously inequality, and from this results the social subordination of woman, a subordination already prefigured in her physical constitution and her psychology; but this relationship is not everything, and it may even be more than compensated for—depending on the individuals and the confrontations—by other dimensions. In the second relationship, that of the human quality, woman is equal to man since like him she belongs to the human species; this is the plane, not of subordination, but of friendship; and it goes without saying that on this level the wife may be superior to her husband since one human individual may be superior to another, whatever be the sex.<sup>13</sup> Finally, in the third relationship there is, highly paradoxically, reciprocal superiority: in love, as we have said earlier, the woman assumes in regard to her husband a divine function, as does the man in regard to the woman.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from these three dimensions of the conjugal alliance, there are, as regards the actual choice of partner, two factors to be considered: affinity or resemblance, and complementarity or difference; love requires both of these conditions. Man naturally seeks—without having to explain it or justify it—a human complement who is of his type and with whom he can consequently be at ease; but on the very basis of this condition, he will seek a complement who is different from himself, failing which one could not talk of complement, for the object of love is to permit human beings to complete one another naturally and not simply to repeat each other. It may happen that a person finds his partner in an individual of another race because this individual, in spite of the racial disparity, on the one hand realizes affinity in a decisive respect and on the other hand represents the ideal complement; in this case, it is not that the person *a priori* preferred the other race, which would scarcely have any meaning, but simply that destiny did not offer him within the context of his own race the irreplaceable partner. In principle, a great

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<sup>13</sup> The *Yoga-Vasishtha* tells the story of the beautiful queen Chudala, who realized the supreme Wisdom—that envisaged by Shankara—and who was the spiritual master of king Shikhidhwaja, her husband.

<sup>14</sup> So true is this that even Buddhism, which is ascetically hostile to sexuality in general and to the feminine sex in particular, could not help populating its heavens with feminine divinities, if it be permitted to express oneself thus; it should be said that we are concerned here with Mahayanic and esoteric Buddhism. This same Buddhism gave rise to the Amidist marriage: Shinran, monk of the *Jodo* school and founder of the Shinshu school, received advice from his master Honen to take a wife, so as to show thereby that the salvation of the direct way offered by Amida Buddha is accessible to married people as well as to celibates; always within the framework of the *Jodo* initiation, which *a priori* is monastic.

love depends on a choice, but in fact it depends largely on destiny: it is *karma* that decides whether the choice will be possible, that is to say, whether the man or the woman will or will not meet the ideal complement. Finally, the complementary type has precedence over the degree of beauty: it is not perfect beauty which is the ideal, but perfect complementarity on the basis of perfect affinity; the man normally endowed with the sense of forms —or let us say, to the extent that he is able to take them into account —will prefer the lesser, but complementary, beauty to the greater beauty which for him is lacking in complementarity.

All these considerations derive from a point of view that depends on the principle of natural selection, which in many cases can be neutralized by a moral and spiritual point of view, but without for all that losing its rights on its own level, which relates to the human norm, and thus to our deformity. At all events, it goes without saying, humanly speaking, that beauty, whatever be its degree, requires a moral and spiritual complement of which in reality it is the expression, without which man would not be man.

If one looks at these things—on which we have dwelt at some length—without the slightest mistrust or hypocrisy, one will realize that they contain teachings which go beyond their immediate context, and one will recognize without difficulty that, even without going beyond it, they have all the interest merited by the human condition, which is ours.

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Krishna, the great *avatara* of Vishnu, had numerous wives, as did, moreover, at a period closer to ourselves, the prophet-kings David and Solomon; the Buddha, likewise a major *avatara*, had none;<sup>15</sup> the same is true of Shankara, Ramanuja and other minor incarnations, who nevertheless were Hindu by tradition like Krishna. This proves that if the choice of sexual experience or chastity may be a question of superiority or inferiority on the spiritual level, it can also be an affair of perspective and vocation, and with the same justification; the whole problem is then reduced to the distinction between “abstraction” and “analogy”, or to the opportuneness, be it intellectual, methodic, psychological or quasi-existential, or perhaps even simply social, of one or other of these options which in principle are equivalent. The question that arises here is to know not simply what man chooses, or what his particular nature requires or desires, but also and even above all how God wants to be approached: whether through the void, the absence of everything that is not He, or through the plenitude of his manifestations, or again through the void and through plenitude alternately, of which the hagiographies provide many examples. In the last analysis it is God who seeks Himself through the play of his veilings and unveilings, his silences and his words, his nights and his days.

Fundamentally, every love is a search for the Essence or the lost Paradise; the melancholy, gentle or powerful, which often appears in poetic or musical eroticism bears witness to this

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<sup>15</sup> That is, he was married in his youth, while he was still *Boddhisatva* and not *Buddha*.



nostalgia for a far-off Paradise and doubtless also to the evanescence of earthly dreams, of which the sweetness is, precisely, that of a Paradise which we no longer perceive, or which we do not yet perceive. Gypsy violins evoke not only the vicissitudes of a love that is too human, they also celebrate, in their profoundest and most poignant accents, a thirst for the heavenly wine that is the essence of Beauty; all erotic music, to the extent of its authenticity and nobility, rejoins the sounds, both captivating and liberating, of Krishna's flute.<sup>16</sup>

Like that of woman, the role of music is equivocal, and so are the related arts of dancing and poetry: there is either a narcissistic inflation of the ego, or an interiorization and a beatific extinction in the essence. Woman, incarnating *Maya*, is dynamic in a double sense: either in the sense of an exteriorizing and alienating radiation, or in that of an interiorizing and reintegrating attraction; whereas man, in the fundamental respect in question, is static and unequivocal.

Man stabilizes woman, woman vivifies man; furthermore, and quite obviously, man contains woman within himself, and vice versa, given that both are *homo sapiens*, man as such; and if we define the human being as *pontifex*, it goes without saying that this function includes woman, although she adds to it the mercurial character proper to her sex.<sup>17</sup>

Man, in his lunar and receptive aspect, “withers away” without the woman-sun that infuses into the virile genius the life it needs in order to blossom; inversely, man-sun confers on woman the light that permits her to realize her identity by prolonging the function of the sun.

Chastity can have as its aim, not only resistance to the dictates of the flesh, but also, and more profoundly, an escaping from the polarity of the sexes and a reintegration of the unity of the primordial *pontifex*, of man as such; it is certainly not an indispensable condition for this result, but it is a clear and precise support for it, adapted to given temperaments and imaginations.

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If for Christianity, as for Buddhism in general, the sexual act is identified with sin,—every euphemistic subtlety apart,—this is easily explained by the fact that inasmuch as the “spirit” is above and the “flesh” below, the most intense pleasure of the flesh will be the lowest pleasure in relation to the spirit. This perspective is plausible to the extent that it takes account of a real

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<sup>16</sup> Visible forms manifest the heavenly essences by crystallizing them; music in a certain fashion interiorizes forms by recalling their essences by means of a language made of unitive sweetness and unlimitedness. Earthly beauty evokes in the soul the transforming “remembrance” of heavenly music, although with regard to this it may appear hard and dissonant: “*Qualunque melodia più dolce sona / qua giù, e più a sè l’anima tira, / parebbe nube che squarciata tona, / comparata al sonar di quella lira / onde si coronava il bel zaffiro / del quale il ciel più chiaro s’inzaffira*”. (Dante, *Paradiso* XXIII, 87-102).

<sup>17</sup> If woman is “of one flesh” with man,—if she is “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone”,—this shows, in relation to the Spirit, which man represents, an aspect of continuity or prolongation, not of separation.

aspect of things, that of the existential discontinuity between the phenomenon and the archetype, but it is false to the extent that it excludes the aspect of essential continuity, which precisely compensates, and on its level annuls, that of discontinuity. For if, on the one hand, the flesh as such is separated from the spirit, on the other hand it is united to it in so far as it manifests it and prolongs it, that is to say, in so far as it is recognized as being situated on the unitive vertical axis or the radius, and not on the separative horizontal axis or the circle; in the first case the center is prolonged, and in the second it is concealed.

The mystery of continuity can be of spiritual benefit depending on the real and not imaginary contemplativity of the individual or on a religious system allowing an indirect and passive participation in this mystery; the risks of a centrifugal effect are in this case neutralized and compensated by the general perspective and the particular dispositions of the religion, on condition, of course, that the individual submits to this in a sufficient manner. For the true contemplative, each pleasure that we can qualify as noble is a meeting with the eternal, not a fall into the temporal and the impermanent.

According to Meister Eckhart even the simple fact of eating and drinking would be a sacrament if man understood in depth what he was doing. Without entering into the details of this assertion, which in fact can be applied at various levels—that notably of craftsmanship and art—we would say that in these cases the sacramental character has a significance which relates it to the “lesser mysteries”; sexuality on the other hand, and this is what proves its dangerous ambivalence, refers to the “greater mysteries”, as is indicated by the wine at Cana. Let us note in this connection that the passive complement of sexual union is deep sleep: here too there is a prefiguration of supreme union, with the difference nevertheless that in sleep the sacramental initiative is entirely from the side of God, who confers his grace on whoever may receive it; in other words, deep sleep is a sacrament of union to the extent that man is already sanctified.

In Islam there is a notion which effectively acts as a bridge between the sacred and the profane or between the spirit and the flesh, and this is the notion of *barakah*, of “immanent blessing”: it is said of every licit pleasure<sup>18</sup> experienced in the name of God and within the permitted limits, that it vehicles a *barakah*, which amounts to saying that it has a spiritual value and a contemplative perfume, instead of being limited to a purely natural satisfaction, tolerated because it is inevitable or to the extent that it is so.

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In order to understand properly the fundamental intention of the Christian point of view, one must take account of the following: the way towards God always involves an inversion: from outwardness one must pass to inwardness, from multiplicity to unity, from dispersion to

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<sup>18</sup> This excludes vices contrary to nature and excesses—harmful to society as well as to the individual—which are obviously not capable of sacralization.

concentration, from egoism to detachment, from passion to serenity. Now, Christianity operates on the basis of the opposition between worldly pleasure and sacrificial suffering, and it is this that explains right away its prejudice against pleasure as such, a prejudice moreover which is more methodic than intellectual; but since by its nature Christianity is a way rather than a doctrine—the patristic argumentation against the Greeks provides one more proof of this—it is led to put all the emphasis on that which in its eyes most nearly brings us, or alone brings us, to the redeeming God: God who is himself the model of suffering and thereby of the way.

The obsessional and in fact defamatory suspicion of Christians with regard to all sacred sexuality is explained by this perspective. It may be objected that marriage is a sacrament; no doubt, but it is a sacrament with a view to procreation, and then physical, psychical and social equilibrium; not of love or union, in spite of the words of Christ which would permit such an interpretation. Exoterism implies an attitude of exclusiveness and alternativism, and thus simplification and stylization; it also implies efficacy, certainly, but not total truth or a stability that is proof against every trial.

We have alluded to the fact that anti-sexualism—apart from the fact that it is to be met with more or less everywhere in one form or other—is likewise a salient characteristic of Buddhism: in this perspective, which is founded on subjectivity and immanence, woman appears a *priori* as the objective or outward element which takes us away from inward and immanent bliss; woman is accident and attracts towards accidentality, whereas the contemplative and interiorizing subjectivity of man pertains to the nirvanic Substance and opens onto it.

This provides us with the opportunity of making the following observation: if Buddhism denies the outward, objective and transcendent God, this is because it puts all the emphasis on the inward, subjective and immanent Divinity—whether it is called *Nirvana* and *AdiBuddha* or by some other name—which moreover makes it impermissible to describe Buddhism as atheistic. In the Amidist sector, Amitabha is the immanent Mercy which our faith can and must actualize in our favor; all beauty and all love are concentrated in this personification of Mercy. If it happens that some Buddhists assert that Amithaba does not exist outside ourselves or that he would not exist without us—analogous formulations are to be found in Eckhart and Silesius—they mean that his immanence and his saving efficacy result from our existence and our subjectivity, for one cannot speak of a content without a container; in brief, if Buddhists seem to put man in the place of God transcendent, this is because man as a concrete subjectivity is the container of immanent liberating Substance.

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In this context, as we were saying, woman appears as the exteriorizing and fettering element: indeed, feminine psychology, on the purely natural plane and when there is a lack of spiritual development, is characterized by a tendency towards the world, the concrete, the existential if one will, and in any case towards subjectivity and sentiment, and then by a more or less

unconscious guile in the service of this in-born tendency.<sup>19</sup> It is with regard to this tendency that Christians as well as Muslims have felt justified in saying that a holy woman is no longer a woman, but a man—a formulation that is absurd in itself, but defensible in the light of the axiom we are speaking of. But this axiom concerning the innate tendency of woman happens to be relative and not absolute, given that woman is a human being like man and that sexual psychology is necessarily a relative thing; one can make as much use as one likes of the fact that Eve’s sin was to call Adam to the adventure of outwardness, but one cannot forget that the function of Mary was the opposite and that this function also enters into the possibility of the feminine spirit. Nevertheless the spiritual mission of woman will never be linked with a revolt against man, in as much as feminine virtue comprises submission in a quasi-existential manner: for woman, submission to man—not to no matter what man—is a secondary form of human submission to God. It is so because the sexes, as such, manifest an ontological relationship, and thus an existential logic which the spirit may transcend inwardly but cannot abolish outwardly.

To allege that the woman who is holy has become a man by the fact of her sanctity, amounts to presenting her as a denatured being: in reality, a holy woman can only be such on the basis of her perfect femininity, failing which God would have been mistaken in creating woman—*quod absit*—whereas according to Genesis she was, in the intention of God, “a helpmeet for man”; and so firstly a “help” and not an obstacle, and secondly “like unto him”, and not sub-human; to be accepted by God, she does not have to stop being what she is.<sup>20</sup>

The key to the mystery of salvation through woman, or through femininity, if one prefers, lies in the very nature of *Maya*: If *Maya* can attract towards the outward, she can also attract towards the inward.<sup>21</sup> Eve is Life, and this is manifesting *Maya*; Mary is Grace, and this is reintegrating *Maya*. Eve personifies the demiurge under its aspect of femininity; Mary is the personification of the *Shekhinah*, of the Presence that is both virginal and maternal. Life, being amoral, can be immoral; Grace, being pure substance, is capable of absorbing all accidents.

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<sup>19</sup> We are here in the realm of imponderables, but what is decisive is that the psychological differences between the sexes really exist, in a vertical or qualitative sense as well as in a horizontal or neutral sense. Perhaps one should add, in order to forestall easily foreseeable objections, that woman finds a means of manifesting her particular worldliness within the very framework of a *de facto* masculine worldliness; in other words, generally human weaknesses do not abolish the specific—but certainly not obligatory—weaknesses of the feminine sex. Finally, it is necessary to recall in this context that modern life ends in devirilizing men and in defeminizing women, which is to the advantage of no one, since the process is contrary to nature and transfers or even accentuates faults instead of correcting them.

<sup>20</sup> *Ave gratia plena*, said the angel to Mary. “Full of grace”: this settles the question, given that Mary is a woman. The angel did not say *Ave Maria*, because to him *gratia plena* is the name that he gives to the Virgin; this amounts to saying that *Maria* is synonymous with *gratia plena*.

<sup>21</sup> When it is said that *Samasara* is Nirvana and vice versa, this means that there is only *Nirvana* and that *Samsara* is its radiance, which is both centrifugal and centripetal, projecting and reabsorbing, creating and saving.

Sita, the wife of Rama, seems to combine Eve with Mary: her drama, at first sight disconcerting, describes in a certain fashion the ambiguous character of femininity. In the midst of the vicissitudes of the human condition, the divinity of Sita is significantly maintained: the demon Ravana, who had succeeded in abducting Sita—following a fault on her part—believes that he has ravished her, but he has ravished only a magical appearance, without having been able to touch Sita herself. The fault of Sita was an unjust suspicion and her punishment was likewise such a suspicion: this is the form taken here by the sin of Eve; but at the end of her earthly career, the Ramayanic Eve reintegrates the Marial quality: Sita, the incarnation of Lakshmi,<sup>22</sup> disappears into the earth which opens for her and this signifies her return to Divine Substance which the earth visibly manifests.<sup>23</sup> The name of Sita, in fact, means “furrow”: Sita, instead of being born of woman, emerged from the Earth-Mother, that is from *Prakriti*, the metacosmic Substance that is pure and at the same time creating.

The Hindus excuse Sita by emphasizing the fact that her fault<sup>24</sup> was due to an excess of love for her spouse Rama; by universalizing this interpretation, one can conclude that the origin of evil is not curiosity or ambition as in the case of Eve, but an immoderate love, and thus the excess of a good.<sup>25</sup> This seems to rejoin the Biblical perspective in the sense that the sin of the first couple was to misappropriate love: to love the creature more than the Creator, to love the creature outside the Creator and not in him. But in this case the “love” is more of a craving on the part of the soul than a form of worship; a desire for novelty or fullness of experience rather than an adoration; and therefore a lack of love rather than a deviated love.

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<sup>22</sup> Lakshmi is a divine but already cosmic personification of *Prakriti*, the feminine pole of Being, of which she manifests the aspect of goodness, beauty and happiness.

<sup>23</sup> The negative symbolism of the earth—arising from the fact that it is “below” and that it suggests downward movement, heaviness and darkness—is neutralized here by the positive symbolism of the earth, that of stability, of fertility, or substantiality and hence of purity, which it seems to manifest by the springs which gush forth from it. Substantiality likewise implies the aspects of depth and strength: by “descending”, Sita reintegrates the depths of her divine substance, the latter coinciding with the power of Lakshmi.

<sup>24</sup> Namely a defamatory suspicion cast on the virtuous Lakshmana, who refused to go in search of Rama since his mission was to protect Sita; he finally obeyed, and this allowed Ravana to abduct the heroine.

<sup>25</sup> The Ramayana, in relating the incident, states that the mind of a woman is “covered with clouds” when the interest of the beloved is at stake; her trust is “inconstant” and her tongue “venomous”; the compensatory quality being the love of her *alter ego*, and consequently the perfect gift of self. In another place, the Ramayana points out the gentle wisdom of the wife in contradistinction from the unreflecting anger of the warrior.

An indispensable condition for the innocent and natural experience of earthly happiness is the spiritual capacity of finding happiness in God, and the incapacity to enjoy things outside of him. We cannot love a creature validly and enduringly without carrying him within ourselves by virtue of our attachment to the Creator; not that this inward possession must be perfect, but it must at all events be present as an intention which allows us to perfect it.

The state—or the very substance—of the normal human soul is devotion or faith, and this comprises an element of fear as well as an element of love; perfection is the equilibrium between the two poles, and this once again brings us back to the Taoist symbolism of *yin-yang*, which is the image of balanced reciprocity: we mean that the love of God, and by reflection the love of the husband or the wife, implies an element of fear or respect.

To be at peace with God is to seek and find our happiness in him; the creature that he has joined to us may and must help us to reach this with greater facility or with less difficulty, in accordance with our gifts and with grace, whether merited or unmerited.<sup>26</sup> In saying this we evoke the paradox—or rather the mystery—of attachment with a view to detachment, or of outwardness with a view to inwardness, or again, of form with a view to essence. True love attaches us to a sacramental form while taking us away from the world, and it thus rejoins the mystery of exteriorized Revelation with a view to interiorizing Salvation.<sup>27</sup>

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

*Whosoever will remember his lusts shall understand that the end of pleasure is sadness. Which if it be able to cause happiness, there is no reason why beasts should not be thought blessed, whose whole intention is bent to supply their corporal wants.*

*Boethius.*

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<sup>26</sup> According to a well-known *hadith*, “marriage is half of the religion”.

<sup>27</sup> As the Veda declares: “Verily it is not for love of the husband that the husband is dear, but for love of *.Atma* that is in him. Verily it is not for the love of the wife that the wife is dear, but for the love of *Atma* that is in her.” (*Brihadaranyaka-Upanishad*, II, 4:5).