“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” (Song of Songs 1:2): Gender, Pleasure and Conjugal Sexual Ethics

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Abstract: The call for gender equality often concentrates more on the role of the woman in the public forum. Equally important is the recognition of the sexual identity of the woman and her sexual desire and fulfilment, especially in marriage. Developing trends in traditional societies like India show that the denial of women’s desire and fulfilment is one of the major reasons behind the rise in marital conflicts. A healthy man-woman relationship as well as the consideration of justice demands an ethics that takes into consideration the female desire and fulfilment. The basis for constructing a gender-sensitive sexual ethics can be found in the Biblical books like Song of Songs. A gender-sensitive sexual ethics demands the reconsideration of many traditional norms and an ethics based on reciprocal and mutual sexual fulfilment.

Introduction: Traditional conjugal sexual ethics was built upon the premise of the inequality and inferiority of the woman. This was true not only about the demand of submission to the “head” (Eph 5: 22-24), but also about her role as a sexual partner. The woman was supposed to have only a passive role in sexual activity. Her role was to be a fertile field to receive and grow the male seed; that is, even in procreation, her role was considered to be only passive. This was more evident with regard to woman’s sexual desire. In general, woman’s sexual desire and sexual fulfilment were ignored. Together with the traditional patriarchal structures, inadequate medical knowledge in the past also contributed to considering the woman as a sexual object than a sexual subject. It was often thought that the woman was not capable of having sexual fulfilment and orgasm. Her desire and fulfilment would be explained, at the maximum, in terms of dependence on the man and of motherhood. Consequently, the whole sexual morality was conceived from masculine perspectives and woman’s sexuality and sexual fulfilment were ignored.

Today, in spite of a greater awareness of the equal dignity of woman and her sexual desire, it is often pointed out that a number of women do not experience sexual fulfil-

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ment in sexual intercourse. For example, some studies reveal that one in three women having heterosexual relations do not experience orgasm and remain dissatisfied in their sexual life. There may be different reasons for this, but one of the main reasons is the insensitivity of the male partner and ignorance about female sexuality and female sexual response cycle. Some other studies have revealed that the number of women who remain sexually dissatisfied in heterosexual intercourse is still higher, especially in countries where sexuality is still a taboo subject and where practices like female genital mutilation continue.

In countries like India – which had boasted about the stability of the family – the number of divorces is fast increasing and a number of women take initiative for the divorce. “The Indian woman... is no longer willing to sacrifice her identity or to bear any misery silently for the sake of her children, family and society.” This new awareness of the woman of their dignity, their needs and her partner’s refusal to accept them are the main factors behind the growing number of divorces, especially in the cities. “It is no longer just trust and commitment that a woman is seeking in marriage, she wants sexual and emotional satisfaction and she wants a life partner who is not just doing well in his career, but respects her career, too.” That is, insensitivity to women’s fulfilment is threatening the stability of marriage and family even in the developing countries.

Catholic sexual ethics has gone much forward from its traditional insistence on procreation as the primary end of marriage. There is a growing importance given to the inseparability of the unitive and procreative purposes and the centrality of love, as well as on the goodness of sexual fulfillment. Many positive attempts can be seen in this regard, especially from the time of Vatican Council II. A recent example will be the recognition of the goodness of eros in Deus Caritas Est. However, a theology giving due importance to sexual desire and fulfillment is yet to be developed. This is especially true with regard to women’s desire and fulfillment, since there continues the impact of a sexual ethics formed according to masculine perspectives.

The contemporary culture, particularly from the time of sexual revolution, attempts to present as role model a liberated woman who seeks pleasure indiscriminately and asserts her identity as a sexual person, because denial of the sexual desire and fulfillment of the woman was integral to a patriarchal sexual ethics. Developing a sexual ethics of women’s sexual fulfillment is important to respond to the challenges that marriage and family face today. This does not mean that we need to blindly adapt to the ideals of the contemporary culture. Instead, we need to reflect upon whether we can develop an ethics of women’s desire and fulfillment based on the Christian tradition. Moreover, creating an awareness of women’s sexual desire and fulfillment is a matter of justice.

Analysing the Song of Songs we shall try to understand how the scripture can become a basis for constructing a sexual ethics that gives due importance to women’s sexual desire and pleasure. Evidently, the Biblical message of the mutuality and reci-

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4 Gunjan Sharma, 18. In the last couple of years there is a 30-40% increase in the number of women seeking divorce and most divorces are happening in the initial first few months. In most cases the reason is that women are not ready to tolerate things beyond a point.

5 Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, § 3-11.
procity of man and woman can be developed on the basis of the creation story, Jesus’ teaching on marriage and St Paul’s instructions regarding marriage. However, in the limited space of the present article, we shall deal with Song of Songs only. Following that we shall consider how theologians today try to develop a gender sensitive sexual ethics that gives due importance to women’s desire and pleasure.

**Song of Songs: A Model for Gender Sensitive Erotic Love and Pleasure**

The interpretation of the Song of Songs has been difficult due to the diverse opinions regarding its basic meaning and purpose. It was interpreted symbolically as expressing the love between Yahweh and Israel, between Christ and the Church and between God and the soul. However, modern biblical scholars are almost unanimous in understanding and interpreting the Song of Songs as referring to human sexual love. Although the Song of Songs can be utilized as an important basis to develop the unitive dimension of marriage, our main concern here is to consider it from the perspective of female sexuality.

**Description of Female Sexuality**

In the biblical context, the Song of Songs has something unique in the presentation of the male and female desire, especially in its presentation of the female sexual desire and fulfilment. David M. Carr beautifully articulates it as follows:

Elsewhere in the Bible, passionate women are often caricatured as promiscuous and wild, unless their passion is for having sons who will ultimately become the ancestors of Israel and its kings. Powerful women like Delilah and Jezebel are images of danger. Yet the Song of Songs ultimately celebrates this powerful, passionate woman. It is her voice that is featured through more than two-thirds of the book, and parallel to the praise of the “woman of power” in Proverbs 31, the man and others in the Song end up praising her incomparable worth.

The Song also presents a beautiful and interesting contrast with the overpowering and domineering male that we usually encounter in the Bible, especially in the prophetic texts. The man (lover) is captivated by the beauty of his beloved, her glances (Song 4:9). She is not the image of the punished Eve whose desire is marked by dependency and who is ruled over by Adam (Gen 3:16), but the image of the original Eve, in whom Adam finds the bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh (Gen 2:23), and to whom Adam is passionately attached.

This extraordinarily positive approach to female sexuality has evoked some theologians to attribute female authorship to the Song. For example, Athalya Brenner holds that although no concluding proofs can be reached, there are compelling evidences for asserting female authorship of the Song. Drawing upon this strong feminist note (as well as some other unique characteristics of it), Jannie H. Hunter contends that the Song was written as a protest literature. There is no doubt that the Song was written within the context of a patriarchal society. However, the values that the Song indirectly stands for are so different from those of a patriarchal society. So Hunter argues:

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6 For example, see Roland E. Murphy, “A Biblical Model of Human Intimacy,” 62.
The Song of Songs then, I contend, presents itself as a song of protest in a society within which women are not allowed to speak openly on many matters where they desire to express an opinion. The book takes as its theme an experience with which every woman of the day would have been familiar, a situation which society would have pressured her into — namely, a (loving) relationship with a man. By so doing the Song of Songs is able to demonstrate against the prevailing social constructs and to evince the fact that the issue of love can never be one of force because its central emotion is one that functions in relation to choice. Above all, women — as well as men — cannot turn on this emotion of love within a relationship of force but only in one of emotional will. A central desire experienced by every human being is thus taken as providing an occasion to demonstrate about a central problem in society on behalf of those who suffer the most under the prevailing rules of that society.9

The longing and the desire that the beloved/woman has are not seen as punishments to which Gen 3:16 refers to, but they are the gifts that she possesses. She (or her lover) does not feel guilty of these feelings. Thus, the Song celebrates the original and uncontaminated beauty of the man-woman love, which is mutual and in which both of them have equal roles. She is very much aware of her erotic love and of her sexual desire, she does not consider them as bad, instead, she knows that her desire and erotic love are good and integral to her personality and hence she is not afraid to express them. Consequently, she is not a passive or silent lover, but a bold and active lover. She enjoys that she loved by her lover, she loves her lover and knows that he enjoys being loved by her; she has the freedom to express her desire for him and he is happy of her desire for him. For him, she is not inferior; he appreciates her boldness to express her erotic love and desire. This reciprocity makes their love stronger and solid.

Depiction of Erotic Love and Pleasure

The Song can be taken as a biblical model of eroticism or the sexual pleasure which a man and woman mutually share.10 The erotic love between the lovers and their pleasure in it is expressed using different literary techniques. Murphy explains these literary techniques mainly under three themes:11

1. Presence/absence: The physical presence of the lovers to each other is obvious from their dialogue. But, the absence is also very significant and it gives opportunity to express the yearning for the presence of the beloved. There are references to their mutual presence, as in 2:6. But more frequent are the verses expressing her yearning and search for her lover who is absent. Some of these are nocturnal experiences (or even dreams), but they express the pain of the absence:

   Upon my bed by night
   I sought him whom my soul loves;
   I sought him, but found him not;
   I called him, but he gave no answer.
   “I will rise now and go about the city,
   in the streets and in the squares;
   I will seek him whom my soul loves”...
   “Have you seen him whom my soul loves?” (Song 3:1-3).

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10 Cfr. Murphy, “Interpreting the Song of Songs,” 104.
11 This is mainly based on Murphy, “Interpreting the Song of Songs,” 104; “A Biblical Model of Human Intimacy,”, 62-65; The Song of Songs, 101-104.
Thus, the absence becomes an occasion to affirm their belongingness to one another, and to say that they are always present to one another: “My beloved is mine and I am his” (Song 2:16); “I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine” (Song 6:3); “I am my beloved’s and his desire is for me” (Song 7:10). For our consideration what is important is that she is not afraid or ashamed of expressing her desire for her lover.

2. Mutuality: Mutuality refers to the reciprocity of feelings between the man and the woman. This mutuality is expressed in different ways, using different symbols like the garden and so on. The lover depicts the beloved using the imagery of a garden:

A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
a garden locked, a fountain sealed.
Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
with all choicest fruits (Song 4:12-13).

To this she replies by inviting him to ‘his garden’ and he happily accepts her invitation:

Let my beloved come to his garden
and eat its choicest fruits (Song 4:16b)
I come to my garden, my sister, my bride,
I gather my myrrh with my spice,
I eat my honeycomb with my honey,
I drink my wine with my milk (Song 5:1a).

There is no indication of male dominance or female subordination. The feelings are mutual, and both the male and female lovers express without embarrassment their desire for having sexual fulfilment.

3. Sensuousness: This plays the most important role throughout the Song. The key role of the senses — seeing, hearing, touching — is expressed without shame, but with delicateness. The very opening of the Song is marked by this sensuousness:

O that you would kiss me with the
kisses of your mouth!
For your love is better than wine (Song 1:2).

Even the memory of the sensations of his embrace are pleasurable:

O that his left hand were under my head,
and that his right hand embraced me! (Song 2:6)

He sings how sweet her lips and tongue and how fragrant her garments are (Song 4:1-15); she exclaims how fragrant he is, how sweet his voice is:

My beloved is to me a cluster of henna blossoms... (Song 1:13-14)
O my dove, in the clefs of the rock,
in the covert of the cliff,
let me see your face,
let me bear your voice,
for your voice is sweet,
and your face is comely (Song 2:14).
“Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” (Song of Songs 1:2)

Though the language is not at all blunt and often many things are left to the imagination of the reader/hearer, it is not coy about erotic sex and sensuality. This is clear from more open and direct descriptions of the physical beauty of the lover/beloved by the partner. Erotic enjoyment of the beauty of the different parts of the body of the beloved, and the erotic intentions are not at all considered to be sinful, but to be an integral part of their mutual love:

How graceful are your feet in sandals,  
O queenly maiden!  
Your rounded thighs are like jewels,  
the work of a master hand.  
Your navel is a rounded bowl 
that never lacks mixed wine.  
Your belly is a heap of wheat, 
encircled with lilies.  
Your two breasts are like two fawns, 
twins of a gazelle.  
Your neck is like an ivory tower...  
How fair and pleasant you are,  
O loved one, delectable maiden!  
You are stately as a palm tree, 
and your breasts are like its clusters.  
I say I will climb the palm tree 
and lay hold of its branches.  
Oh, may your breasts be like clusters of the vine, 
and the scent of your breath like apples, 
and your kisses like the best wine 
that goes down smoothly, 
gliding over lips and teeth (Song 7:1-9).

The bride accepts without embarrassment, but with joy, her lover’s delight in her beauty. But, what is more conspicuous and challenging is that the bride/beloved is not at all ashamed to describe the physical beauty of her lover. This courage from the part of the beloved to acknowledge her sensuality and her pleasure in the physical beauty of her lover is something characteristic of the Song:

His head is the finest gold;  
...His cheeks are like beds of spices, 
yielding fragrance.  
His lips are lilies,  
distilling liquid myrrh.  
His arms are rounded gold, 
set with jewels.  
His body is ivory work, 
encrusted with sapphires.  
His legs are alabaster columns, 
set upon bases of gold...  
His speech is most sweet,  
and he is altogether desirable (Song 5:11-16).

12 Description of the physical beauty of the lover/beloved is a common feature in the Middle Eastern literature. This literary genre is called *waasf*. Often objects from nature — plants, animals, mountains, towers, etc. — are used to describe the beauty of the person.
Even in the popular literature of our times, often the description of the physical beauty of the lover by the beloved is not so common! Even today, expressing the enjoyment of the woman in the man’s physical beauty may raise many eyebrows! And, even today, in spite of the more profound understanding and acceptance of the goodness of sexuality, it will not be easy for many to consider these as the Word of God!

Though there is a frank description of the erotic body parts, it is clear that there is no intention of having a hedonistic and self-centred pleasure. Rather, the frankness is an indication of the confidence, love, sharing and mutual commitment between the lover and the beloved, a confidence and love and sharing that encompasses the physical, sexual, emotional and every aspect of their life. Moreover, even such descriptions do not make the Song pornographic. What is described is not clinical acts of lovemaking, but emotions of love coming from their deep understanding and high esteem for each other. The “lovers do not only speak about the general emotions of love, but celebrate the physical beauty which can be enjoyed as part of the love relationship.”

This calls for a re-consideration of the continuing opinion that the Bible gives more importance to the procreative dimension and a re-evaluation of the continuing scepticism towards erotic love and enjoyment. And, more specifically, it demands a critical appraisal of the sceptical attitudes towards female sexuality, sexual desire and sexual pleasure.

**Christian Tradition: Totally Ignorant of Female Sexual Desire?**

It will not be right to consider the whole Christian tradition as ignorant of and ignoring the importance of female sexual desire and fulfilment. The Fathers and the theologians were products of their own times and the socio-cultural context did not help them develop a sexual ethics more sensitive to female desire and fulfilment. However, in the theological tradition, we can notice a growing recognition of female sexuality and desire. In the traditional sexual ethics, besides the procreative intention, conjugal sexual intercourse “for the avoidance of fornication” or for “fidelity to the bed” was usually accepted as a valid motive, and “mutual availability” was insisted upon. Indirectly, these recognised female sexual desire and pleasure. An exceptional recognition of the female desire and fulfilment can be found in Bishop Francis Patrick Kenrick’s*Theologiae Moralis*, who wrote that the wife had the right to bring herself to orgasm “by touches” after sexual intercourse, if she had experienced no climax during the intercourse. He also held that a husband who did not remain sexually active until his wife reached orgasm

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14 Though we can say this in general, there are also differing opinions the Christian tradition. For examples, John Chrysostom made use of the Christ-Church imagery to develop the theology of marital love. But, there is also the opinion that he made use of this imagery to speak of marital love, instead of insisting upon the procreative norm, because according to him the earth was already fully populated and this had brought reproductive sex to an end (Cfr Peter Brown, *The Body and Society*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 306). Similarly, in spite of the fact that Thomas Aquinas speaks about the beauty of man-woman friendship, he was influenced by the traditional medical views that considered woman as inferior. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse in detail the attitude of the Christian tradition to women. For a detailed account of the history of the Christian approach to sexuality, see Shaji George Kochuthara, *The Concept of Sexual Pleasure in the Catholic Moral Tradition*, Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2007.

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was guilty of a venial sin of omission and that it was mortal sin for a wife to distract herself during sexual intercourse in order to avoid having an orgasm.\textsuperscript{16}

Kenrick founded his argument on Thomas Aquinas and Alphonsus Liguori. He pointed out that although there were some severe philosophers who rejected all enjoyment, St. Thomas said that they counselled badly. Kenrick further argued that passion could even add to the moral goodness of an act. Writing on concupiscence, he argued that consent to the passion resulting from a good act was itself another good act.\textsuperscript{17} This gave grounds to conclude that passionate sex in marriage was morally superior to sex without passion. Kenrick also utilized the argument of Liguori, who permitted the same on the grounds of “perfection” to any child that might be conceived.\textsuperscript{18} Although Kenrick based his argument on Liguori, he eliminated the connection of woman’s orgasm to conception and emphasized only her right for orgasm. In virtue of this omission, the encouragement of orgasm grew stronger and more unconditional.\textsuperscript{19} Further, in his list of reasons for a husband’s obligation to seek intercourse, Kenrick replaced the negative purpose of helping the wife to avoid sin with a purpose of “satisfying the wife.”\textsuperscript{20}

**Female Sexual Desire: Implications for a Gender Sensitive Sexual Ethics**

One of the factors that has contributed to the recognition of love as integral to marriage and marital intimacy is the emancipation of woman, her emergence as a full-fledged, equal sexual partner.\textsuperscript{21} This emancipation of woman can be seen in the growth of her erotic sensibility and in her seeking to share the same level of pleasure as her mate.\textsuperscript{22} Not only the development in theological understanding, but also the socio-cultural developments and growth in social sciences have brought this positive change. Guindon observes that the deviations in the present culture, although negative, are only signs of humanity’s struggle to discover the meaning of this new sexual reality. The discovery of this new meaning of sexuality, according to him, is the real sexual revolution that is taking place today.\textsuperscript{23} This new understanding of women’s sexuality and sexual desire has its implications for sexual morality.

\textsuperscript{16} Cfr. Francis Patrick Kenrick, *Theologiae moralis*. III, 310: Cfr. Gardella, *Innocent Ecstasy*, 9. This teaching of Kenrick seems to be extremely interesting. But, unfortunately, so far I haven’t come across any reference to Kenrick except in Gardella, who says that Kenrick was the “first American writer to prescribe orgasm” and that he was very important in the Catholic approach to sexual ethics.


\textsuperscript{18} Alphonsus Liguori, *Theologia moralis*, 6.918, 919. Parallel to the doubts whether women enjoyed sexual pleasure, there was also the concept in some medical traditions that for the perfection of the child to be conceived, it was necessary that the woman reached orgasm. Such conflicting views can be seen in different branches of science in any age.


\textsuperscript{22} Cfr. Guindon, *The Sexual Language*, 128. Referring to Nelli Guindon says, “Through the centuries... the erotic sensibility of woman has evolved, in a first moment, from exteriority to interiority, from convexity to concavity. Today, without abandoning the vaginal component, woman is becoming once again clitoral and “active”. She is also leaving aside her role as long-suffering servant to become erotic, even as a spouse, seeking to share the same level of pleasure as her mate. In other words, woman has worked actively, especially during recent years, at her “virilization” while man is in the process of discovering and gradually accepting his own femininity”.

\textsuperscript{23} Guindon, *The Sexual Language*, 112.
Mutual Sexual Pleasure as Normative in Conjugal Sexual Activity

"The first word coming to mind (while considering the different aspects of sexual intercourse) is mutual pleasure or, better, mutual sensual pleasure: to give sensual pleasure to the other and to receive sensual pleasure from the other — this, in a word, is the apparent ideal of the sexual exchange", observes Mark Oraison.24 In sexual intercourse, great attention is to be taken for the demands and desires of the other. As the physiology of sexual response cycle is different for the man and the woman, an attitude of understanding and self-domination is needed. This can be done through information and through a Christian formation of the conscience. What is important is that the sexual relationship may not be reduced to mere technique of experiencing sexual pleasure, but rather it should be considered a language and a sign of human love that expresses an authentic commitment to the other.25

Lack of mutuality in sexual intimacy and attempts to exclude the partner from sexual pleasure will diminish the pleasure not only of the one excluded, but also of the one that uses the partner for pleasure. Using the partner will result in the inability to feel any of the reflected pleasures of the other. For those who respect mutuality, the pleasure resulting from the pleasure of the partner is powerful.26

Gudorf points out that mutuality in sexual pleasure implies also mutual consent to sexual intimacy. She shows that even in marriage very often sexual intercourse takes place without the consent of the partner.27 We may note that the Christian tradition, rather than emphasizing mutuality, has emphasized the “right” of the husband/wife over the body of the other. Mutuality also demands change in the traditional ideas that “good women are always passive.”28

Mutuality in sexual intimacy and pleasure presuppose love and respect for the partner. The communication of respect and concern for the partner helps to maximise pleasure in sexual intimacy, because the meaning of the sexual activity is intensified by the respect and care that the couple have for each other.29

Howard J. Clinebelle and Charlotte H. Clinebelle also emphasise mutuality in conjugal sexual intimacy and say that couples should be free to follow their own impulses sexually, to play and experiment with new positions, new settings, and new approaches to foreplay. Open communication about what gives each maximum pleasure is greatly helpful for developing a unique style. The criterion to decide whether or not to engage in various forms of sex play is what gives both pleasure.30 Even today, in many cultures, women are viewed only as sex objects for men’s pleasure.31 As a result, many men take for granted that they have the right to have the pleasure even if it involves violence or

force on the woman. Considering mutual sexual pleasure as the primary end of sex can prevent abuses and exploitation in sexual activity.32

The norm of mutual pleasure presupposes the recognition of the sexual identity of the woman and her sexual desire. If desire and pleasure are defined only in terms of the male experience and only as those belonging to the male, then the question of mutuality is out of question. Even today, in many of the cultures, expression of sexual desire and enjoyment of sexual pleasure by the woman will be considered as something unbecoming even within marriage. Some may feel that it is strange to say that about a world that lives in the age of sexual revolution. But, for example, think about the virtues related to sexuality, such as virginity, fidelity, chastity, modesty, etc. They are often identified more as virtues of the female, and lapses in these from the part of the male will be tolerated more easily and considered as natural weakness of the male. What I am trying to propose is not that women also should be given the freedom to be licentious, but that a sexual ethics that understands desire and fulfilment only in masculine terms will lead to double standards and encourage further the objectification and exploitation of women, and the ill-treatment of the female partner. An ethics that recognises female sexual desire will demand equal responsibility from the part of the male. Moreover, accepting the woman as an equal partner having sexual desire will facilitate building up a relationship of mutual respect and sharing.

Self-gratification and Gratification of the Partner: Opposites or Complementary?

Mutuality in conjugal sexual intimacy means respecting the partner, knowing what is pleasurable to the partner and giving importance to the pleasure of the partner. It may not be contested that the search for selfish pleasure does not give real pleasure to oneself or to one’s partner. At the same time, enjoying pleasure in sexual intimacy is not selfishness, if mutuality is respected. Moreover, enjoying pleasure in sexual intimacy is an integral part of mutuality. According to Häring, the acceptance and enjoyment of the pleasure by each partner is necessary so that the conjugal act becomes a positive experience: "The conjugal act would become distasteful if one of the spouses were to try to refuse its pleasure and thus kill the joy of the being-together, being one flesh. The deeper the meaning in true love in mutual self-bestowal, the greater is the joy and pleasure also."33 Joseph Bird and Lois Bird also think in this line. For them, the two-fold responsibility of the spouses is, “to give sexual fulfilment, and to strive to achieve it.”34 This giving and receiving, according to them, is very important in conjugal intimacy:

It would be a mistake to think of this love-making solely in terms of giving, even mutual giving. All love-making actions, regardless of how giving they may be... (bring) pleasure and increasing arousal to the one giving — or at least this is the way it should be... The sexual arousal experienced by the one “giving” stems not only from observing the sexual response of the other one, but also from the physical stimulation experienced in the “giving”... Unless we keep this rather apparent fact in mind, we may tend to think of these love-making actions as solely giving, and overlook the pleasure that should be derived.35

This does not mean that the woman (or the man) should think about only her

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33 Bernard Häring, Free and Faithful in Christ, II, 514.
pleasure or that she should become selfish. In fact, there is no conflict between self-enjoyment and the enjoyment of the partner. As Tom Driver underscores, the very meaning of sexual love includes self-gratification as well and that this should be an essential dimension of Christian sexual ethics:

Love is not only responsibility and agape. It is also eros, which means desire. Sexual desire is not only desire of the “other”... It is also desire for self-gratification. The great power of sexual desire comes from the fact that it combines desire for the other with desire to gratify the self...

No sexual ethic, including a Christian one, can be valid if it does not recognize the sex-force as power in its own right and in both its other-directed and self-directed aspects.36

Gudorf’s words may make it clearer: “In sex, if one partner is consistently acting to pleasure the other person without openness to receiving pleasure him/herself, the pleasure of both persons in the relationship decreases. The active partner can over time become the controlling partner, which both partners can come to resent.”37 After all, authentic self-love is necessary for mature human relationships, because proper self-esteem and love of self make it less likely either that I will try to exploit others or that I will make myself available for exploitation.38 Thus, love of self is morally legitimate. Similarly, enjoyment of pleasure in sexual intimacy, when it is not an exploitation of the partner, is morally legitimate and good.

Sex Education as a Moral Responsibility

The physiology of sexual behaviour is different in the man and in the woman. This is obvious especially from the difference in the way of experiencing orgasm. This difference demands an attitude of reciprocal understanding, self-domination and harmonious realization of the different phases of sexual behaviour. Adequate information regarding the physiology of sexual behaviour and differences in the sexual response patterns of the sexes will be helpful not to reduce the sexual behaviour to mere techniques of gaining pleasure. Sexual relationship is to be understood, rather as sign of human love and Christian charity.39 Sufficient knowledge of one’s own physiology and sexual response patterns as well as those of the partner will only help the couple appreciate and enjoy the God-given gift of sexuality and sexual love. It is with this insight that Jack Dominian opines that, “In the future the morality of sexual intercourse will include how patient the spouses are to prepare each other for lovemaking and how patient and disciplined they are to reach orgasm together, thus ensuring that one does not peak earlier than the other, leaving one partner unsatisfied.”40 That is, sufficient knowledge about the different dimensions of one’s own sexuality and that of the partner and sufficient knowledge of sexual response cycle is a moral responsibility. We may not be surprised to notice that even in this age of sexual revolution, a number of people, even after years of living

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37 Gudorf, Body, Sex and Pleasure, 116.
38 Cfr. Vincent J. Genovesi, In Pursuit of Love, 139. Please note also, “Satisfying intimacy within a relationship begins with self-love... As we use the term, self-love does not mean conceit, selfishness, or lack of consideration of others; in fact, these qualities are usually indications of personal insecurities. By self-love we mean a genuine interest, concern, and respect for ourselves — the ability to look in the mirror and appreciate the person we see and to feel excited about that person’s potential”: Robert Crooks – Klara Baur, Our Sexuality, 190.
40 Dominian, Let’s Make Love, 91.
together, lack sufficient knowledge of sexuality, especially that of the partner. Naturally, this results in the denial of woman’s enjoyment.

Ignorance of sex may also result in excluding oneself or the partner from sexual pleasure. For example, in the male-dominated cultures, women may take only a passive role in sexual intimacy. They may never become aware of the importance of shared pleasure in sexuality and may never communicate their experience and needs to the partner, as they have been trained or as they are supposed to be passive only. This passive role and exclusion from sexual pleasure may affect the total quality of the conjugal relationship. If this exclusion of a partner is due to insensitivity and from deliberate intention, it also signifies that she/he is being used only as an instrument for the pleasure of the other partner. Sex may be confused with dominance as well. Then sexual pleasure becomes dependent upon the experience of dominance or control. This also may become common especially in a male-dominated society. As a result, man’s experience of pleasure may be confused with the controlling power he experiences in sexual intimacy, whereas the woman may take it for granted that her role is to be subordinate. At the same time, there may be situations where the woman identifies her pleasure with emotionally controlling the man. Both these models will not help the growth in conjugal intimacy.

Mutual Pleasure and Love

While proposing the importance of sexual pleasure in conjugal sexual intimacy, it is important not to isolate sexual intimacy and sexual pleasure from the totality of conjugal life. In fact, sexual intimacy, if it is to be successful, “cannot be done in isolation from the enactment of altruistic love in the rest of their (of the couple) life”. Sexual intimacy becomes meaningful and enriching only when it is rooted in the love of the couple: “In fact, love-making is not even the usual way, let alone the only way, in which couples express their love for each other. When it does come to be so, when it is not the enactment of a more comprehensive sexual tenderness, it can become frustrating, irritating, even repulsive.” In other words, making pleasure the motive of sexual intimacy can become exploitative if it is not founded on altruistic love between the couple. This is especially true in the case of women. Unless they experience tenderness, warmth, intimacy and communication in other moments of life, they will not be able to experience that even during physical sexual intimacy.

Vidal underscores that heterosexual relationship should be a language of obbligative love so that it may become personalised and personalising. Vidal says that love may present itself in different forms and distinguishes three types of love: 1. Love of enjoyment: It is made obvious through a sexuality of pleasure. Often this approach is behind the usage, “to enjoy a woman”. Sexuality can be lived a personal experience of enjoyment, in which the partner is not considered as a person, but only as a source of pleasure. Sexuality of this kind creates no attachment between the partners; once the enjoyment and pleasure are over, another person is sought for. This is an immature and adolescent type of sexuality. 2. Possessive love: Sexual love can become possessive, as

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41 For example, Kalam observes: “Often, the role of sexual relations, though it is of paramount importance in the life of human beings, is not discussed. It is swept under the rug kept hidden even from the life of married people”. Kalam, “Sex and Love”, 6.
42 Gudorf, Body, Sex and Pleasure, 119-127.
43 Charles A. Gallagher – al., Embodied in Love, 34
shown by the expression, “to possess a woman”. This is often expressive of different psychic shortcomings and is indicative of an almost neurotic sexuality. 3. Oblative love: Only oblate love, which seeks intimate union, reciprocal communion lived in mutual giving and acceptance, makes human sexuality meaningful. 4.

**Re-thinking Certain Traditional Norms and Concepts**

Feminist theologians further raise an issue that deserves special attention. Based on different research data it is pointed out that even today it cannot be presumed that most women actually experience sexual pleasure. But, there is little attention to this absence of pleasure in so many women. Gudorf points out that the Church continues to proscribe only penile-vaginal intercourse. All other sexual activity are considered “foreplay” or perverse. But, research shows that 56-70% of women cannot reach orgasm as a result of penile-vaginal intercourse alone, whereas it is almost always pleasurable for men. Besides, even today, the necessary elements for the completion of marital act are considered to be penile penetration, the semination of the vagina and male pleasure and orgasm. That is, the wife’s sexual pleasure is not mentioned at all. “The many activities which are more likely to prove pleasurable for women... do not get identified in official magisterial teaching except when they are proscribed as ‘polluting’: Jung opines that, “the absence of sexual joy in so many women’s lives is in part a consequence of the way “good sex” has been constructed in Christian tradition.”

One of the threats to mutuality in sexual activity is the traditional concept that sexual pleasure is irresistible, that is, once there is sexual arousal, it cannot be controlled and hence automatically it proceeds to gratification. Many feminist theologians today see it as a male view of human sexuality. The understanding of sexual pleasure as irresistible justifies egocentric behaviour in sexual activity, that is, one who is under the influence of sexual arousal is unable to think of the pleasure of the partner, that one can do nothing else as one is under the influence of a force that is irresistible. On the other hand, experience proves that sexual pleasure, for men as well as for women, is not irresistible. Irresistibleness of sexual pleasure is not a given human condition, but a sign of the lack of concern for the partner: “The inability to postpone immediate sexual gratification constitutes an impediment to concern for the pleasure of the partner... It is control of sexual pleasure — knowing when and how to postpone sexual gratification, using techniques to build arousal in self and partner — which intensifies sexual pleasure for oneself and one’s partner.”

Conclusion: Gender justice has implications not only for the role that the woman has to play in the society or in the family, but also for the recognition of her sexual desire and sexual fulfilment. The society is still reluctant to acknowledge and recognise the woman as a sexual person. Although the media may present the woman as a sexually liberated and asserting person, this is not recognised often in actual life. Hence, the woman remains sexually dissatisfied. This, in fact, threatens the stability of marriage and family and consequently social well-being. A gender-sensitive sexual ethics demands the recognition of woman as a sexual person, and of her sexual desire and fulfilment. The basis for constructing such a sexual ethics can be found in the biblical tradition. However, this requires a re-consideration of many of the norms in the traditional sexual ethics built upon the premises of a masculine concept of sexuality alone. Reciprocal and mutual sexual fulfilment should be considered a basic norm of Christian conjugal sexual ethics. Creative fidelity to the Christian message about the goodness of sexuality demands such a gender-sensitive sexual ethics.

Bibliography


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