

# Reflections on the Song of Songs, Eros, Body, Sexuality and Spirituality

## Finally Comes the Poet

That he would kiss me with the kisses of his mouth' – with these words begins what has to be the most surprising inclusion among the Old Testament writings. Not only does the Song of Songs display a level of sensuality unmatched elsewhere in the Bible, its 'secular character'<sup>1</sup> (the biblical God does not feature anywhere in its poetic lines) and 'continuous celebration of passion and its pleasures' (Alter, 1985, p. 185) make it stand out in a collection of texts that is not renowned for such concerns.

It is for these and similar reasons that Jewish and Christian readers have frequently struggled with this short book. Allegorical interpretations of the Song that read it as an expression of God's love for Israel or that between Christ and the church, or the individual soul, have at least in part been fuelled by a deep-seated discomfort with these openly erotic poems. More recently, however, interpreters have come to cherish the Song's celebration of human love and sexuality. Having given a rather dire account of some of the Old Testament's content, Duncan's tone gets rapturous when he introduces the Song (2003, pp. 13-14):

Then comes the Song of Songs – and where O where have we landed? Lips suddenly made for kissing! The loveliest bodies made ... to adore and ravish. Breasts created ... that a lover might caress and coddle then pillow his head between them. The beloved's body not a thing to deny as temptation, but a sacred gift to be lured ... into the most intimate possible contact with our own body. Sexual union openly pined for!

Brueggemann, in a book whose title I have borrowed for these introductory reflections, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (1989), associates daringness with the words of Israel's poets, which included the prophets but also the poet responsible for the Song. Daring some of its poems most certainly are in their evocation of intense erotic longing and its fulfilment in the pleasures of sexual encounter.

Daring and clearly erotic, yet without straying into the pornographic, the Song nowhere explicitly mentions the lovers' genitalia (even though attempts at finding explicit references have been made). And yet some of its imagery is highly suggestive. Talk of aromatic wine and delicious juices; exotic fruits that are offered, tasted and enjoyed; an opening into which the lover thrusts his hand; a bowl that, it is hoped, will never lack sweet wine is bold and unembarrassed. The creators of the Song, in highly sensual images, confidently evoke the pleasures that the lovers' bodies hold in store for each other.

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<sup>1</sup>Terms such as 'secular' and 'religious' need to be used with great caution, as they are modern, dualistic categories that import concepts back into ancient societies that would have been foreign to them.

It is impossible to gauge the reception these love poems would have had upon their first circulation in ancient Israel, but their subsequent reception throughout the history of Jewish and Christian engagement with the Song certainly indicates that their daringness was all too keenly felt by a host of readers who nervously sought to avoid its unabashed celebration of human erotic longing and its realisation in fulfilling sexual encounters with the beloved person by turning it into a disembodied spiritual allegory.<sup>2</sup>

Some have expressed their surprise at the fact that the Song even found its way into the biblical canon. According to Duncan (2003, p. 13), ‘the survival of these openly erotic and mystical songs in the same text touted by generations of Puritans, Conquistadors, Inquisitors, misogynist priests, and fundamentalist book burners is an outright miracle of fidelity to holy writ’. Pardes (1992, p. 129) suggests that the Song’s inclusion in the canon may have simply been due to ‘a certain amount of blindness on the rabbis’ part’. Yet she is clearly aware of mishnaic discussions, which reveal that the nature of the book had been an issue for debate among the rabbis.

It appears that the issue was eventually settled by the verdict of Rabbi Akiba (c. 40–137). ‘Heaven forbid’, he said, ‘that any man in Israel ever disputed [the status of] the Song of Songs ...’,<sup>3</sup> for the whole world is not worth the day on which the Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, and the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies’ (*Mishnah Yadayim* 3:5, as quoted in Pardes, 1992, p. 120). As Pardes points out, ‘in a striking rhetorical move Rabbi Akiva plays with the superlative structure of the phrase Song of Songs ... and turns the text whose holiness was called into question into none other than the “Holy of Holies”’.

But who wrote these remarkable poems? The short answer is that we don’t know. The book has always been associated with Solomon, but the Solomonic ascription אֲשֶׁר לְשׁוֹלֹמֹה (‘*āšer lišlōmōh*), ‘which is Solomon’s’, need not imply authorship.<sup>4</sup> There is nothing in the text that would allow us to determine its author, although the suggestion has been made that it might have been written by a woman. This is an intriguing conjecture, which cannot be proven. In general, our knowledge about ancient Near Eastern culture favours the assumption of male authorship, but Exum (2005, p. 65) allows that love poetry ‘may have been a genre to which women made a special contribution’. Ultimately, however, the issue of authorship is less significant than is sometimes assumed. As again Exum notes, it is far more important that the voices created by the poet are seen to be authentic. And many would concur with her judgement (p. 66) that ‘the poet of the Song

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<sup>2</sup>Once again, it should be noted, however, that this is not true of all allegorical interpretations. Some, rather than to avoid the Song’s erotic dimension, celebrate it by applying it to the reader’s loving relationship with God or Christ *in addition to* the Song’s primary reference to human love and sexuality.

<sup>3</sup>Literally: ‘that any man in Israel ever disputed that the Song of Songs renders the hands unclean’. As Walsh (2000, p. 190) explains, ‘holiness for the rabbis was determined by whether a book was spiritually powerful and authoritative enough that anyone touching it became ritually unclean’.

<sup>4</sup>See my comments on Song 1:1 for further discussion.

has created believable female and male characters and explores what it is like to be in love from both their points of view with great sensitivity to subtle differences between men and women’.

The time of writing is equally difficult to determine. Persian loanwords, such as פֶּרְדִּים (*pardēs*), ‘orchard’, in 4:13, haven been taken as an indication of a late date, possibly in the third century BCE, but their presence does not rule out the possibility, entertained, for instance, by Alter (1985, p. 185), that the poems, which might have been modified over time, ultimately go back to Solomonic times (Alter speaks of the early First Commonwealth period). Goldstein (1975, p. 10) regards the Song as a collection of love poems that may have been composed over a long period of time, stretching from the eighth to the third centuries BCE.

Over the course of this week, I wish to pursue two main aims in our sessions on the Song. One is to help us become familiar with the book itself, especially its sometimes exotic imagery. I hope to take us through the book almost verse by verse, although we may not be able to look at every line in as much detail as we might wish and may even have to skip some sections, depending on our progress during the week. I also would like us to explore some issues arising out of our reading, such as metaphor and beauty, the Song’s history of interpretation, the body and sexuality, eros and spirituality.

However, before we now move on and begin with our reading of the Song, I should perhaps give you a provisional definition of the terms ‘eros’ and ‘erotic’, as I shall have reason to use those terms from time to time over the next few days. My definition is going to be a provisional one, because the notion of eros is, as I have just said, one of the issues that we are going to explore in more detail over the course of this week. At this point, it seems to me particularly important to distinguish between eros and eroticism, on the one hand, and pornography and voyeurism, on the other.

‘Eros’ and eroticism, at their most basic level, have to do with desire, the desire to transcend ourselves (see e.g. Paz, 1995, p. 13). Eros is the God-given force within us that takes us out of ourselves, propelling us to connect with the world. In the narrower context of our sexual relationships, eros is that which distinguishes human sexuality from animal sexuality. Human eros is made possible by our imagination, which has the power to turn ‘sex into ceremony and rite’. Thus in the words of Paz (1995, p. 3), who calls eroticism ‘a poetry of the body’ (p. 2).

The voyeuristic look associated with pornography treats the Other as an object. Exum (2005, p. 23) suggests that a ‘look is objectifying when the one seen is expected to reveal intimate secrets and to become fully accessible to a viewer who remains invisible and inaccessible’. Pornography and voyeurism are about power and control (see Walsh, 2000, p. 44; and Exum, 2005, pp. 22-23). In the erotic look found in the Song, however, the mystery and otherness of the Other are preserved by means of figurative language.

And the eroticism of the Song is characterised by love and mutuality. Looking at his beloved, the man loses control (4:9). In fact, mutual desire, mutual erotic longing, renders both lovers vulnerable. As again Exum (2005, p. 23) says, 'neither lover constructs the other without being affected themselves'.

But it is time for us to turn to the Song itself, which, as Tribble (1978b, p. 100) once said, 'speaks from lover to lover with whispers of intimacy, shouts of ecstasy, and silences of consummation'. I have provided my own translation from the Hebrew text so that you can follow the interpretation of the Song that I am going to present. My translation follows the traditional English versions wherever possible. At times it disagrees with the majority, but it needs to be borne in mind that the English translations are part of an established tradition in which different translations have tended to influence each other. Occasionally, my translation departs from all the standard translations, but in those cases it still follows a translation suggested by one of the major commentators on the Song.

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## **In the Garden of Metaphor**

**T**he novelist A. S. Byatt once expressed herself to be baffled by the Song of Song's rich sensuality. 'There is an element of excess', she says, 'of too much, too much fruit, too many riches, too much landscape' (1998, p. xvi). This, she believes, has the effect not only of metamorphosing the lovers into the natural world, an interesting concept to which we shall return, but also of turning the Song into 'a polymorphous celebration of everything'. The Song, she concludes, is 'a poem about the making of poetry, the naming of the world, the construction of the world by the human imagination, powered by the erotic desire'.

What is apparent from these comments, apart, perhaps, from Byatt's modern sensibilities that struggle with the Song's rich ancient Near Eastern figurative language, is the perspective of a writer. The Song is indeed a polymorphous celebration, if not exactly of everything, then certainly of far more than just the two lovers and their passion for one another. But is this a poem about the making of poetry? I doubt that this captures its sensuous richness, so well observed by Byatt, accurately. That richness is best described not so much as an appreciation of poetry for poetry's sake but of beauty, the beauty experienced in creation, creation as encountered in the beloved but also in nature, God's wider creation, and indeed in culture, the creative contribution to God's creation by those created in his image.

Capturing the first two of these aspects, Alter (1995, p. 121) draws attention to the fact that in the Song, aptly described by him as 'the great love poem of commingling – of different realms, different senses, and of the male and female bodies', in this poem the 'luxuriance of the human body' is matched by the 'luxuriance of the landscape'. This is achieved by the poet's deft use of imagery, of metaphors and similes that abound in imaginativeness and playfulness. This is not a poem about the making of poetry; the poet, as again Alter so perceptively observes, rather invites us into a 'garden of metaphor' (thus the title of Alter's chapter on the Song of Songs in *The Art of Biblical Poetry* [1985]). So let us follow the poet's invitation and enter this garden of metaphor. Let us explore, in a first step, how the poet's metaphorical language appeals to our senses.

### **The Song's Metaphors and the Senses**

Touch, in the words of O'Donohue (1997, p. 101), 'brings us out of the anonymity of distance into the intimacy of belonging'. Touch is the most intimate of our senses and is thus of particular importance for the enjoyment of physical love. However, as Alter (1995, p. 122) notes, touch, in line with the Song's 'delicacy of expression', is never directly referred to, except for a general verb like 'embrace' (2:6). One would have to qualify that observation slightly by pointing out, for instance, that the woman's longing for

her lover's kisses in 1:2 equally evokes the sensation of intimate touch. Additional examples could probably be adduced without too much difficulty, but Alter's observation is nonetheless an important one, because it alerts us not only to the Song's 'delicacy of expression' but also the fact that its focus is on the other senses. For instance, when the lover is described as a sachet of myrrh that is lying between the woman's breasts all night, the perfume metaphor foregrounds the sense of smell. And yet, as Alter (1995, p. 122) notes, 'the image of a sachet resting between breasts also beautifully suggests the intimate and pleasurable touch of flesh upon flesh'.

Sight and sound, as senses that are experienced at a distance, are, according to Alter, of secondary significance in this 'poem of physical closeness'. Indeed, he points out that, when sight is mentioned for the first time in 1:6, it occurs in a negative context: 'don't just see that I'm swarthy'. For Alter, the only instance where sight features as 'a vehicle of intimacy' (1995, p. 123) is in 4:9: 'you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes'. While that may be the case, sight still plays a substantial role in the Song. This is particularly apparent in the two lovers' descriptions of each other's bodies. In 4:1-5, for instance, we find the man marvelling at the beautiful body of his beloved. Her eyes, her flowing black hair, her perfectly white teeth, her sensuously red lips, her neck and breasts – all these are described with evident appreciation. The woman's description of her lover's body in 5:10-15 similarly focuses on visual aspects.

Yet Alter is right that, when the Song describes the couple's most intimate moments, it is the senses of taste and smell that predominate. The allusions to kissing (1:2; 4:11; 5:16; 7:10) with their particular emphasis on the sweetness of the kisses, expressed in recurring references to wine, illustrate this, as do the references to the woman's sexuality, which is described in terms of a lush garden whose fruits and herbs are sensuous delights that please the nose and entice the taste buds (see esp. 4:12-15). As Alter recognises, the pleasures of touching are frequently implied in these metaphors but are not in themselves dwelled upon.

It is worth noting another of Alter's observations, namely, that in the pairing of the senses, taste usually comes before smell, as in 4:10 where the tasting of the sweetness of the woman's kisses leads the man to comment on the fragrance of her perfume. As Alter notes, this goes against the typical pattern of Hebrew parallelism, which usually features a 'movement of rising intensity', which we would expect to culminate in the more intense pleasure of the kiss. Alter speculates (1995, p. 123) that the reversal encountered in the Song might reflect 'an impulse in the language of the poem to plunge into the immediacy of love's pleasures, for which tasting or drinking or eating is a primary metaphor, whereas fragrance is less a metaphor for the thing itself than a pleasurable secondary attribute associated with it'.

## The Body and the World

Earlier on, I referred to A. S. Byatt's observation that the Song metamorphoses the lovers into the natural world, a phenomenon she regards with some reservation. For her, as we saw, there is simply 'too much landscape' in the Song (Byatt, 1998, p. xvi). Byatt's observation regarding the frequency with which it features is apt. There certainly is much landscape in these poems, much fruit, many spices, animals, architectural artefacts, gardens, vineyards, fields ... Yet it is precisely in this richness that we encounter the spirit of the Song. That richness is an invitation, an invitation to enter into the imagination of the ancient poet, an imagination suffused with rich sensuality, an imagination that interweaves the two lovers with the world around them. As Alter (1995, p. 130) notes:

if the poet frankly imagines the body, male and female, as an alluring map of erogenous zones, the figurative language of the poem again and again translates that bodily reality into fresh springs, flowering gardens, highlands over which lithe animals bound, spices and wine, cunningly wrought artifacts, resplendent towers and citadels and gleaming pools.

Once again, Alter's work can help us appreciate how the poet achieves this interweaving of the two lovers, their bodies and their erotic longing for each other with the world around them.

In 2:8-9 the woman hears her lover approaching. It is his footsteps that she can hear, apparently from afar, as he leaps over mountains and bounds over hills *like* a gazelle or a young stag. Having arrived at last at their meeting place, he peers in through the window. Strikingly, in the poet's description, the distinction between figure and referent gets blurred at that point; the realms of the simile and the literal fuse. As Alter (1985, p. 194) notes: 'It is easy enough to picture a soft-eyed stag, having come down from the hills, peering in through the lattice; it is just as easy to see the eager human lover, panting from his run, looking in at his beloved.'

Another example of this phenomenon, not discussed by Alter, is found in 2:3 where the woman compares her lover to an apricot tree, a tree that gives delightful shade and sweet fruit. However, in the woman's expression of her appreciation for these commodities, the poet's skill once again blurs the distinction between the tree and the man, as the pronouns in the last two lines can refer either to 'his shade' and 'his fruit' or to 'its shade' and 'its fruit'. Here, as in the previous example, the lover, in the words of Alter (1985, p. 194), 'is entirely assimilated into the natural world at the same time that the natural world is felt to be profoundly in consonance with the lovers'.

In 7:8-9 (7-8), the man compares the stature of his beloved to a stately palm tree. Once again, the poet expresses this by means of a simile: 'this stature of yours is *like* a palm tree'. However, the simile, having only just been introduced, just as quickly ceases to be one when the man literally decides to climb the palm tree and enjoy its fruit. Alter (1985, p. 195) speaks of the simile being enacted. Yet again, 'the boundaries between

figure and referent, ... human body and ... natural setting' have 'become suggestively fluid' (thus Alter, 1985, pp. 198-199), since the tree that is being climbed in order for its fruit to be enjoyed is none other than the female protagonist.

Similar dynamics are at work in 2:17 and 8:14, as we return to the earlier simile in which the male lover is compared to a gazelle or a young stag. Except that in these verses he is not heard from afar, bounding over literal mountains and hills. Here the woman invites him to be like those animals and frolic on the 'cleft mountains' (2:17) or 'spice mountains' (8:14), which are clearly not literal mountains. What the man is encouraged to do here is nothing other than to explore the landscape of the woman's body (cf. Alter, 1985, p. 195).

But what are we to make of this metamorphosing of the lovers into the natural world? Alter offers us two suggestions. In his earlier work on the Song, in which he pointed out that the 'enchancing interfusions between the literal and metaphorical realms' that we have just explored are unique within the biblical corpus, he proposed that these interfusions may have been inspired by the poet's perception of 'the exuberant gratification of love through all five senses' (1985, p. 202). In other words, it is the intense sensual gratification experienced in human love and sexuality that leads the poet to invoke the natural world with all its sights, sounds, smells and tastes.

In his subsequent reflections, Alter makes the intriguing observation (1995, p. 130) that, while 'in more explicit erotic literature, the body in the act of love often seems to displace the rest of the world', in the Song of Songs 'the world is constantly embraced in the very process of imagining the body'. Focus on the beloved and her or his body does not eclipse the world. Instead, in the Song's poems the beauty in both, the beloved and the world, is recognised and celebrated.

### **Beauty, Nature and the Body**

Building on these observations and the thinking of the Irish poet, philosopher and mystic John O'Donohue, I would like to offer some brief reflections on beauty, nature and the body. Beauty, O'Donohue points out (2004, p. 221), 'awakens, envelops, inspires and delights us'. It 'calls us beyond ourselves' (p. 51), enlarges our life (p. 20) and offers us 'a sense of homecoming' (p. 2). The Song of Songs bears witness to these effects of beauty, effects experienced by the lovers in the poems, the poet responsible for their creation and us, their readers.

The beauty of the lovers themselves and of everything they encounter, the gardens and vineyards, the fruits and spices, the plants and animals, delights us; it inspires us, ignites our imagination and has the power to awaken us to the beauty around us. It is by means of that awakening to the other and the world around us that our lives are enriched and enlarged. The Song of Songs is important not only for its celebration of hu-

man love and sexuality, even though that makes it an invaluable asset, but also for its celebration of beauty itself, the many riches, the excesses that so troubled A. S. Byatt.

It is only by means of our senses, sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, and hence our body that we are enabled to experience that beauty. As O'Donohue (1997, p. 84) points out, 'the senses are our bridges to the world'; it is through attention to them that 'a renewal, indeed a complete transformation' of our life can come about. It is the senses that call us out of ourselves, thereby enlarging our lives. It is our senses that bestow us the gift of sensuality, the sensuality without which we would be isolated from the world around us, the views, sounds, smells, tastes and the touch that connect us with the creation. Nature, says O'Donohue (1997, p. 76), is 'the mother of all sensuality'. Nature, the divine creation, invites us to make use of our senses. The Song of Songs celebrates nature, its delicious fruits, fragrant herbs and imposing mountains. Like nature, the Song, too, invites us to use and cherish our senses; it celebrates the gift of sensuality.

Nature, says O'Donohue (1997, p. 76), 'is the direct expression of the divine imagination. It is the most intimate reflection of God's sense of beauty', beauty that finds expression in the creation, a creation we are invited to look at, listen to, smell, taste and touch. Nature, as God's creation, testifies to the fact that, in O'Donohue's words, 'there is nothing in the universe as sensuous as God' (1997, p. 76). The Song of Songs, by showing its deep appreciation for the sensuality of nature, celebrates this divine imagination. Containing no reference to God, the Song nonetheless celebrates a sensuous God; and it does that by rejoicing in the divine creation.

But the divine creation is not summed up in all those references to fruits, spices, gardens, vineyards, animals, trees and mountains. If the metamorphosing of the lovers into the natural world indicates an appreciation, a celebration of that world, it also conversely celebrates the lovers' bodies and their enjoyment of their sensuality and sexuality as a substantial part of that beautiful creation. As O'Donohue (1997, p. 69) insists, 'the human body is beautiful. It is such a privilege to be embodied. You have a relationship to a place through the body'. Interestingly, O'Donohue, much like the poet of the Song of Songs, stresses the relationship or interconnectedness between body and world or, more specifically in his case, body and place. And he goes on to describe the body as a sacrament, 'a visible sign of invisible grace' (1997, p. 72), a notion whose significance perhaps becomes more apparent the more we explore the gift of our God-given sensuality and sexuality.

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## The Building of Airy Places?

At a time when the Song of Songs plays hardly any role in Christian spirituality and imagination, it may come as a surprise that this widely neglected text used to be one of the most frequently read and commented upon books of the Bible. There are more Latin manuscripts on the Song than on any other biblical text and, judging by the amount of sermons that have come down to us, it seems that medieval preachers turned to it more often than to any other Old or New Testament book, with the sole exceptions of the Psalms and the Gospel of John.

As is widely known, both Jewish and Christian interpreters have, for almost two millennia, tended to read the Song with reference to the mutual bond of love between God and his people, either defined as Israel or the church, in which case the bridegroom is understood to be Christ. It is precisely this tendency of allegorisation that explains the Song's popularity among earlier generations of readers, preachers and commentators. Allegorical readings have been severely criticised in recent years, but a review of the Song's history of interpretation indicates that the debate over how this book is best read is in fact as old as the text itself.

### Early Jewish Interpretation

It is sometimes said that an allegorical interpretation of the Song, in which the male lover is equated with God, must have prevailed from the beginning. Otherwise, it is maintained, this 'secular' book, which not only fails to mention God but also presents female eroticism in strikingly positive terms (Pardes, 1992, p. 128), would hardly have found its way into the biblical canon. Those who believe that it was the Song's allegorical interpretation that made it acceptable tend to quote the injunction by Rabbi Aqiba (c. 40–c. 137) against those who sing it in wine-taverns, thereby turning it into an ordinary song. Such people, Aqiba insists, have no share in the world to come (*Tosefta Sanhedrin* 12:10; *Sanhedrin* 101a).

Of course, these rabbinic warnings in themselves indicate that 'such a literal reading was not uncommon, and that the temptation so to regard the book was ever-present' (Goldstein, 1975, p. 7). As Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 30) point out, Aqiba's emphatic prohibition makes 'it perfectly clear just what people were doing, and where'. Pardes similarly notes that the very fact that the Song's status was debated by the rabbis indicates that its 'otherness did not go unnoticed' (1992, p. 119). That said, it is still not unreasonable to assume that it was the allegorical reading of the Song that ultimately paved the way for its inclusion amongst Israel's sacred scriptures. Alternatively, the assumption of Solomonic authorship may have been enough to guarantee its inclusion,

and as a Solomonic text, it might well have been read as a wisdom text that portrayed the bond of love between man and woman (thus Audet, 1955).

While there is no doubt that the Song came to be read allegorically within Jewish interpretation, Murphy cautions that there is no firm evidence to suggest that the roots of this interpretative tradition can be traced to pre-Christian times (1990, p. 14).

### **Patristic and Medieval Christian Interpretation**

Christian readings of the Song of Songs in the patristic era quickly came to develop the allegorical tradition that finds its classical expression in the work of Origen and his successors. The earliest exponent of such a reading was Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235), who understood the Song as a Solomonic prophecy about the end of the old covenant and the beginning of the new, in which the church replaces Israel as the object of God's love. Hippolytus's approach is perhaps best known for his interpretation of the male breasts in Song 1:2 as the Old and New Testaments. To be sure, the Hebrew text, along with the standard English translations, does not feature any breasts in that verse. Hippolytus's interpretation is based on LXX's *μαστοί σου* (*mastoi sou*), 'your breasts', which reflects a different reading of the Hebrew, i.e. דָּדְךָ (*daddêkâ*), 'your breasts', instead of דְּדֶךָ (*dôdêkâ*), 'your lovemaking'.

However, to return to early Christian interpretations of the Song, the classic work from the patristic period is the ten-volume commentary by Origen (184/185–253/254), written in 240–245, of which only the initial three volumes have been preserved. Origen understands the text as a marriage song that is primarily concerned with spiritual matters, and he identifies the two protagonists as the divine Word and the soul or the church, thus offering both a psychic and an ecclesial interpretation. Origen explains the rationale for his allegorical reading, telling us that the issues the Song talks about 'seem to [him] to afford no profit to the reader as far as the story goes'. Hence it is necessary 'to give them all a spiritual meaning' (1957, p. 247). Murphy explains that, 'appropriately understood as a part of scripture, the Song should address the spiritual needs of its audience. [Origen's] chief concern is for theological relevance' (1990, p. 19). It is thus assumed, certainly by Origen but apparently also by Murphy, that there is no spiritual dimension to human sexual longing and that the issue of human sexuality is of no theological relevance in itself.

Origen's approach to the Song was subsequently endorsed by influential patristic thinkers such as Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), Ambrose (c. 330–397), Jerome (c. 347–420), Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376–444) and Theodoret (c. 393–c. 457). There was, effectively, only one significant dissenting voice during the patristic era, that of Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428), the leading figure of the Antiochene school of exegesis, who rejected the allegorical approach developed by the Alexandrians and Ori-

gen's exegetical work in particular. Theodore read the Song of Songs as love poetry written by Solomon in response to criticisms of his marriage to the dark-skinned daughter of pharaoh. The fact that Theodore was eventually condemned by the Second Council, while only tangentially related to his reading of the Song, helped to effectively monopolise the allegorical approach to the Song.

Medieval Christian interpretation was decisively shaped by Gregory the Great (540–604), whose approach was strongly indebted to Origen. Like Origen, Gregory identified the two lovers as the church and her divine Lord. He did acknowledge the erotic character and physical language of the text, suggesting, however, that 'by the words of love that is below, the soul may be moved to love that, which is above' (Murphy, 1990, p. 23). The Venerable Bede (d. 735) similarly adopted an allegorical approach in order to portray the nuptial relationship between Christ and the church. Bede understands the female lover 'as the unblemished church of the saints', thus contributing to a tendency in medieval Christianity to see 'the church as the actualization of a sort of platonic ideal, the pristine bride of Christ garbed in spiritual splendor' (Murphy, 1990, p. 24).

Another key figure in medieval Christian interpretation of the Song was Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), a highly controversial character, not least because of his support for the second crusade. Bernard wrote eighty-six sermons, focusing on the Song's first two chapters (Bernard of Clairvaux, 1971, 1976, 1979, 1980). As Murphy notes, these sermons 'are widely recognized to be at once the crowning achievement of the approach ... initiated by Origen and the superlative contribution of monastic theology to Christian spirituality' (1990, p. 25). Bernard addresses himself to those who seek consummation of spiritual union with God, but he does not repress the Song's sexual language (see Leclercq, 1982, pp. 73-86).

As an aside, I thought it worth pointing out that there is an interesting comment by the editor of the fourth volume of Bernard's sermons on the Song (in Bernard of Clairvaux, 1980, p. 215) to the effect that when Bernard died

without completing his sermon commentaries on the Song of Songs ... the work was taken up by Gilbert of Hoyland, abbot of Swineshead Abbey in Lincolnshire, England. When he, in turn, died without having completed the commentary, it was finished in one hundred twenty sermons by John, Abbot of Ford (in Dorset, England).

This is a good illustration of the extraordinary preoccupation with the Song within patristic and medieval Christianity I mentioned earlier.

However, Bernard's theology has been severely criticised for eroticising violence, pain and torture. According to Brock, 'torture and abuse marked the Bride of Christ, who gloried in the cross of affliction because it united her to Jesus, in mystical, erotic union' (2011, p. 70). For Brock, Bernard's theology amounts to a 'toxic elixir of violence, suffering piety, and necrophilia' (2011, p. 70). Indeed, she laments that Bernard 'sancti-

fied killing for God as a form of love, and [that] he exalted self-abasement as true erotic love, as ecstatic desire' (Brock, 2011, p. 71).

Another well-known medieval Christian approach to the Song identifies the female protagonist with Mary. This had already been suggested in the writings of Ambrose but was further developed by Rupert of Deutz (d. 1129). In this interpretation, Mary was seen as representative of the church, thus giving a new form to the idealisation of the church by medieval Christian thinkers.

### **Medieval Jewish Interpretation**

One of the most important documents for our understanding of Jewish interpretation during the medieval period is *Canticles Rabbah*, the oldest surviving midrash on the Song. Here, the male lover usually represents God, while the female protagonist is identified with the community of God's people or with individual Israelites. To return to the example of the presumed male breasts of Song 1:2, which Hippolytus related to the Old and New Testaments, these are, in a similar move, identified by Rabbi Yohanan of Tiberias (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) as the written and oral Torah (*Cant. Rab.* 1:2.2).

Targum *Šîr haššîrîm*, the only surviving Aramaic Targum to the Song, reads the book as an account of the five key epochs in Israel's salvation history (see Murphy, 1990, pp. 30-31, for details). While representing another allegorical approach to the book, it has been suggested that the interpretation offered by the Targum was meant to repudiate the mystical readings prevalent in both Christian and Jewish tradition (Loewe, 1966, pp. 193-195). The Targum's approach to the Song was also adopted by subsequent Jewish interpreters such as Solomon ben Isaac or Rashi (d. ca. 1105), Samuel ben Mair or Rashbam (d. ca. 1155) and Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164), who read the book as an allegorical drama about a young woman who falls in love with a shepherd, which figuratively depicts the history of Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh.

An example of Judaism's tradition of the Song's mystical interpretation is Moses ben Maimon or Maimonides (1135–1204), who thought that it portrayed the yearning of the human soul for reunification with God. Maimonides, too, had his followers, among them Levi ben Gershom or Gersonides (1288–1344). Yet another way of reading the text was suggested by Don Isaac Abrabanel (1437–1508), who thought the Song celebrated the love between Solomon and his bride, personified Wisdom.

### **From the Reformation to the Modern Era**

From the time of the European Renaissance, which revived the study of the Classics, and especially the Reformation, which benefited from the renewed interest in the ancient languages that the Renaissance had fostered, biblical interpreters began to display greater sensitivity to the Hebrew text of the Song. A stronger concern to recover the

text's 'literal sense', as opposed to its allegorical meaning, also began to develop during this period, but allegorical and mystical interpretations continued to thrive well beyond the medieval period.

Martin Luther's (1483–1546) 'Brief but Altogether Lucid Commentary on the Song of Songs' illustrates this well. While being scathingly critical of earlier readings, which he regards as 'immature and strange' (Luther, 1972, p. 191) and as displaying a large 'share of absurdity' (1972, p. 264), Luther himself ends up proposing yet another allegorical reading, in which the male lover is once again identified with God or the divine Word, while the female protagonist is the populace of Solomon's kingdom. As Murphy points out, Luther understands the Song as a 'poetic encomium on the political order, in which Solomon celebrates his own government as responsive to the love that God has bestowed upon it' (1990, p. 34). At times, Luther also lapses back into seeing the bride as the church or the individual soul (see Murphy, 1990, pp. 34-35, for details).

Another fascinating approach to the Song, which developed in the seventeenth century, read it as a detailed prophetic allegory of the history of the church leading to the triumph of evangelical Protestantism over Catholicism (Murphy, 1990, p. 36). This was the line taken, for instance, by the Puritan divines Thomas Brightman (1562–1607) and John Cotton (1585–1652) as well as the German commentator Johannes Coccejus (1603–1669). Another Marian interpretation was offered by Pope Pius V (1504–1572), while the Spanish Carmelite mystics Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) and John of the Cross (1542–1591) continued the line of interpreters who saw the book's topic as the 'spiritual marriage' between Christ and the individual soul (Murphy, 1990, pp. 36-37).

It was only in the seventeenth century that the call of the Dutch Renaissance humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) for biblical exegesis to be grounded in the text's 'grammatical-historical plain sense' began to be heeded by interpreters of the Song. As a result, commentators revived Theodore of Mopsuestia's interpretation of the Song as a celebration of Solomon's marriage to an Egyptian princess (see Murphy 1990, p. 37). Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) went a step further in suggesting that the Song consists of profane love poetry. Bishop Bossuet (1627–1704) understood it as a Solomonic nuptial liturgy, while also maintaining that, on a typological level, it related to the soul's spiritual marriage with God (Murphy, 1990, pp. 37-38). Bishop Robert Lowth (1710–1787), well-known for his pioneering work on Hebrew parallelism, similarly combined a literal reading with an emphasis on the Song's portrait of the mutual love between Christ and the church.

Modern critical engagement with the Song began at the end of the eighteenth century in the wake of the Enlightenment. It quickly led to another new avenue first suggested by Johann Friedrich Jacobi (1743–1819), who offered a dramatic interpretation of the book, according to which Solomon, a tyrannical king, was competing with a humble

shepherd for the hand of the Shulammitte. However, the most influential modern interpretation, which has arguably shaped contemporary readings of the Song more than any other proposal (see Clark, 1946, p. 1099 no. 29, and the discussion in Baildam, 1999, pp. 294-302), was that of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), who categorically rejected the allegorical approach, regarding the book as a collection of erotic love poetry instead.

While Herder's understanding is reflected in most current interpretations, there have been two notable traditions that developed subsequently to his influential work. The first is associated with J. G. Wetzstein, whose study of modern Syrian wedding customs led him to propose several parallels between those customs and the Song, including the honouring of the couple as royalty and the extravagant praise of their physical charms (see Wetzstein, 1873). Wetzstein's conclusions, which were most fully developed by Budde (1898), stand in the tradition of the earlier works by Origen, Bossuet and Lowth, all of whom had related the Song to ancient Hebrew wedding customs. However, as Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 34) note, Wetzstein's theory runs into difficulties because, although the man is addressed as 'king', the woman is nowhere called a 'queen', and the Song has nothing to do with a wedding ceremony.

Another notable development was the mythological or cultic interpretation of the Song associated with Theophile J. Meek. The impetus for this approach came from the comparative study of ancient Near Eastern texts, which led Meek to suggest that the Song preserves fragments of an ancient Canaanite fertility liturgy that had been appropriated by the Israelites for the worship of Yahweh and his consort (see Meek, 1922–23, 1924a and 1924b). Meek's theory gained a surprising amount of popularity in the first half of the twentieth century but has since been abandoned, not least because Meek himself, in one of his later works, has distanced the Song's poetry from the cultic celebration of a 'sacred marriage' (Meek, 1956, pp. 94-96). It is worth noting in this context that, by strictly adhering to the human sphere, the Song steers clear of ancient Near Eastern paganism (thus Pardes, 1992, p. 126). Nor does it show any concern with the issue of fertility.

At present, there is wide-spread agreement among commentators that the Song's evocative poetry portrays the passionate yearnings of a human couple for each other, but allegorical readings have by no means been abandoned, as for instance the recent commentaries by Jenson (2005) and Griffiths (2011) indicate.

### **Reflections on Allegorical Interpretations**

Commenting on the allegorical interpretation of the Song that has so dominated its history of interpretation, Byatt wonders whether it is 'the nature of the text or the nature of the theology that brings about all the building of these airy places', as she puts it. Of

course, the rhetorical slanting of the question already pre-empts the answer, and so it comes as no surprise when she concludes that it was due to the early readers' 'interpretative anxiety about incarnation, spirit and matter' (Byatt, 1998, p. xi) that they sought refuge in allegorical readings that managed to avoid the Song's physicality. Pope (1977, p. 114) likewise suggests that 'celibate Christian theologians were ... able by allegory to unsex the Sublime Song and make it a hymn of spiritual and mystical love without carnal taint'.

Others have come to similar conclusions, but Murphy, who praises Origen's allegorical reading of the Song as 'an intellectual achievement of monumental proportions' (1990, p. 21), disagrees, rejecting especially the suggestion that the allegorical approach is adequately explained as a 'pathological rejection of human sexuality' (p. 16). For him, broader issues were at stake in allegorical readings, such as the general concern of patristic and medieval Christianity to find ways of making sense of the Old Testament in the light of the New. Another possible explanation for the pre-modern preoccupation with 'spiritual' meaning might lie in O'Donohue's comment that the medieval mind was so enamoured with symbols and thus probed things so deeply in order to penetrate into their supernatural reality that 'it ended up losing sight of the sensuous presence of the thing itself' (2004, p. 46).

We also must differentiate between allegorical readings that truly did seek to evade the Song's focus on human sexual longing and the readings of mystics, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, Teresa of Ávila and John of the Cross, which, while reading the Song allegorically, were quite attuned to its erotic dimension and 'remained true to its intensity and passion' (thus Bloch and Bloch, 1995, p. 32). It is important, therefore, that we seek to avoid premature and one-sided conclusions regarding the drive behind allegorical interpretations, and yet what seems to amount to a pathological rejection of sexuality is observable in some Christian authors, as we shall see in our next session when we take a closer look at Christian thinking about sexuality.

At this point, I merely wish to point to two problems with allegorical readings. After all, since they have dominated Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Song for such a long time, it is important that we note their shortcomings. The first is perhaps more of a paradox than a problem, and it is one that has been noted, for instance, by Byatt (1998, p. viii) who has pointed out that, if one wishes 'to reject the flesh and its desires', the choice of the Song of Songs is a curious one, given that it is, to put it in Byatt's own terms, a rather 'rich, fleshy metaphor for the divine longing'. Origen exemplifies the paradox perfectly. Struggling with sexual desire himself, he cautions against reading the Song if there is a danger of it fostering carnal desires – and then he goes ahead and writes a ten-volume commentary on the book.

Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, allegorical readings are arbitrary and have all too often tended towards the fanciful and even ridiculous. As Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 31) note, this kind of reading can involve 'considerable ingenuity and linguistic acrobatics'. Examples of the ridiculous include interpretations of the woman's breasts as Moses and Aaron, or the Old and New Testaments, and of her navel as the Great Sanhedrin. However, none of this is to suggest that the Song cannot be approached spiritually. It clearly can and, I would say, ought to be read spiritually, but a discussion of the forms that this might take will have to wait until our final session.

Let me instead conclude these reflections on the Song's history of interpretation with another comment by Bloch and Bloch (1995, p. 30) who, picking up Rabbi Aqiba's observation that it was apparently well-known in ancient Israel's wine-taverns, suggest that 'for the young men in the tavern, or the young women in the vineyard, the Song needed no interpretation, whatever the theologians were saying'.

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## **The Garden of Eroticism**

Once again, I would like to begin with a quote by A. S. Byatt (1998, p. vii), who characterised the Song of Songs as ‘a cry of erotic longing and a description of erotic bliss’. Seddon (2010, p. 20) speaks of its ‘discreet and “incandescent eroticism”’, while Ernst (2003, p. 23) sees its language as ‘seductive and intimate, conveying to the reader an intoxicating experience, a sensuous desire’. O’Donohue (1997, p. 72) similarly notes that the Song ‘celebrates the sensuous and the sensual with wonderful passion and gentleness’, while Alter (1985, p. 203) highlights its ‘imaginative realization of a world of uninhibited self-delighting play, without moral conflict’.

There are several intriguing notions in these quotes, erotic longing and bliss, seductive language and sensuous desire, self-delighting play without moral conflict. All of these perceptively describe key aspects of the love poems that make up the Song of Songs. Yet it is not with these concepts in themselves that I wish to begin but with the dimension that underlies them all, which is human embodiment. As Alter (1995, p. 130) has pointed out, ‘the figurative language of the Song ... firmly anchors love in the experience of the body’. Indeed, he contends that it ‘celebrates the body as few other poems, ancient or modern, have done’ (pp. 130-131). Seddon (2010, p. 11) similarly observes that the Song is about ‘sheer delight in the body of the other’.

We have already begun to explore how the Song celebrates beauty, the beauty of the physical world in which the two lovers find themselves and, even more importantly for our purposes, the beauty of their bodies. At this point, I would like to build on the Song’s celebratory attitude towards human embodiment and sexuality and reflect on it in the light of Christianity’s troubled history in relation to these matters. As Bonhoeffer (1953, p. 131) once said, ‘it is a good thing that the book is included in the Bible as a protest against those who believe that Christianity stands for the restraint of passion’.

### **A Story of Two Dualisms**

Christianity’s troubled relationship with human embodiment and sexuality seems surprising, given both the Old Testament’s affirmation of the goodness of a divine creation and the New Testament’s central focus on the divine incarnation. As Nelson (1978, p. 19) notes, because of these roots, ‘Christian theology ought to have an immensely positive bias toward embodiment’. Unfortunately, however, that has not always been the case. All too frequently, the body has been regarded as a source of sinfulness, corruption and depravity. Christianity is not alone in this. In Buddhism, for instance, the rejection of sex has often been regarded as essential to the achievement of freedom (Nelson, 1978, p. 45). However, given the pervasive influence that Christian attitudes regarding the body and human sexuality have had on Western culture, a brief survey of some key

statements and perspectives can help us to appreciate how a reading of the Song of Songs that does not shy away from its overtly erotic dimension can enable us to redress the balance and celebrate those aspects of our common humanity.

We begin in the early third century, with Origen (184/185–253/254) who, in his *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, writes that ‘there is a love of the flesh which comes from Satan, and there is also another love, belonging to the spirit, which has its origin in God ... If you have despised all bodily things ... then you can acquire spiritual love’ (*Homilies on the Song of Songs* 1.2, as quoted in Phipps, 1975, p. 51). According to Origen, then, ‘all bodily things’ are to be despised in order for spiritual love to be possible. His theology was deeply indebted to Platonic dualism, which led him to think of the human being as consisting of two persons, an inner, spiritual one, identified with the soul, which is created in the image and likeness of God, and the outer, physical, carnal body, which has been secondarily fashioned from the dust of the earth (thus Murphy, 1990, p. 20).

Origen (1957, p. 22) worries that an immature reader of the Song ‘will be turned away from the spirit to the flesh, and will foster carnal desires in himself’. In fact, his anxieties about carnal desires went so far that he went to the utmost extreme of castrating himself ‘in his search for pure spiritual love’, to put it in Byatt’s words (1998, p. viii). To be sure, Eusebius (c. 263–339) makes it clear that this received a mixed reaction. Demetrius (d. 306), for instance, while noting the ‘zeal and sincerity of [Origen’s] faith’, apparently marvelled exceedingly at his rashness (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.8.3, as quoted by Caner, 1997, p. 401).

Ambrose (c. 330–397), commenting upon another key text for Christian thinking about the body and human sexuality, the story of Adam and Eve, proclaims that ‘the serpent is a type of the pleasures of the body. The woman stands for our senses and the man for our minds. Pleasure stirs the senses, which, in turn, have their effect on the mind. Pleasure, therefore, is the primary source of sin’ (*Paradise* 15.73, as quoted in Miles, 1989, p. 92). Apart from the body–mind split (in Origen’s case, the same dualism was expressed in terms of body and spirit), what is worth noting in Ambrose’s statement is his rejection of pleasure and the senses, and his association of the contemptible body and the senses with woman and the (preferred) mind with man.

Jerome (c. 347–420), a contemporary of Ambrose, is referred to here as one among a number of early Christian writers who prized virginity as one of the highest goals attainable. Commenting upon the difficult phrase in 1 Timothy 2:15, according to which woman ‘will be saved through childbearing’ (σωθήσεται δὲ διὰ τῆς τεκνογονίας [*sōthēsetai de dia tēs teknogonias*], see the discussion and extensive bibliography in Mounce, 2000, pp. 94–102, 143–147), Jerome offers an extraordinarily narrow interpretation, suggesting that ‘the woman will then be saved if she bear children *who will remain virgins*’ (*Against Jovinianus* 1.47). For Jerome, the married state is not only inferior

to that of virginity; he actually goes so far as to speak of the ‘vomit of marriage’ (*Epistle* 54.4.2), and he maintains that virgins should not bathe together with married women, for ‘woman with child is a revolting spectacle’ (*Epistle* 107.11).<sup>5</sup> Once again, the deprecation of the body is more than evident from these comments.

Apparently in contrast to most Christian writers before him, who thought that procreation by sexual intercourse had not existed at all prior to the Fall and would still not exist had it not occurred (thus Miles, 1989, p. 94), Augustine (354–430) believed that sexual intercourse did exist in the garden of Eden. Yet Augustine struggled with sexual desire, the urgency and compulsiveness of erotic longing. His vision of sex in Eden was one of calmness and control. Sexual intercourse, he believed, would have happened ‘at the bidding of the will’ (*City of God* 14.23), ‘at the appropriate time, and in the necessary degree’ (*City of God* 14.24), i.e. as necessary for the production of offspring. ‘The instrument created for the task would have sown the seed on the “field of generation” as the hand now sows seeds on the earth’ (*City of God* 14.23).

It is only as a result of the Fall that human bodies became ‘subject to the same drive by which there is in animals a desire to copulate’ (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 11.32). And that drive troubled Augustine, mainly because he could only conceive of sexual desire and intercourse as ‘lust’, as his insistence that even marriage was only ‘a legalized depravity’ (*City of God* 14.18) indicates.<sup>6</sup> Nelson (1978, p. 53) points out that Augustine ‘sees no power in love to transform the sex act in any significant way’. Loss of control was one of his deep concerns. As again Nelson notes, Augustine found it difficult to come to terms with the loss of control experienced during intercourse when both reason and will are overwhelmed. In addition to these worries, he was also troubled by the potential embarrassment of impotence. Lust, he says, ‘although on the whole it is totally opposed to the mind’s control, ... is quite often divided against itself. It arouses the mind, but does not follow its own lead by arousing the body’ (*City of God* 14.16).

Like Ambrose, Augustine, in his reading of Genesis 2–3, distinguishes sharply between the senses or the flesh and the mind; and like him, he associates the former with the woman. Asking why it had been the woman who had been approached by the serpent, he surmises that perhaps it was because ‘she was living according to the spirit of the flesh and not according to the spirit of the mind’ (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 11:42).<sup>7</sup>

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), in notable contrast to those influential male writers, offers quite a different account of the story of Genesis 2–3, one that envisages the relationship of the primeval couple as one of ‘mutuality, interdependence, and complementarity’ (thus Miles, 1989, p. 101). These qualities also extended to sexuality in para-

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<sup>5</sup>All Jerome quotes in this paragraph are from Miles, 1989, p. 67.

<sup>6</sup>According to Nelson (1978, p. 53), for Augustine ‘every act of intercourse is inherently lustful’.

<sup>7</sup>All Augustine quotes in these two paragraphs are from Miles, 1989, pp. 94–97, 212.

dise, which, while free from the compulsive urgency that characterises postlapsarian sexuality, would nonetheless have been of comparable intensity and pleasure. Hildegard's description of sexuality after Eden, which was informed by her pastoral practice of listening to women's accounts of their sexual experience, laments the loss of gentleness and mutuality in lovemaking. Yet in marked contrast to the likes of Origen, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine, Hildegard did not regard human sexual longing as sinful and contemptible:

But the great love that was in Adam when Eve came forth from him, and the sweetness of the sleep with which he then slept, were turned in his transgressions into a contrary mode of sweetness. And so, because a man still feels this great sweetness in himself, and is like a stag thirsting for the fountain, he races swiftly to the woman and she to him (Hildegard of Bingen, as quoted in Miles, 1989, p. 104).

Here, postlapsarian sexual desire is understood as sweetness, even though the accounts Hildegard had received from contemporary women led her to postulate that lovemaking in Eden would have been a different, much gentler affair. Unfortunately, as Miles (1989, p. 105) notes, Hildegard's interpretation, which is characterised by 'esteem for women, their bodies, and their sexuality', for a long time remained unknown outside the confines of her monastery.<sup>8</sup>

Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536), in his *Enchiridion militis christiani* (*Manual of the Christian Soldier*), according to Miles (1989, p. 163) one of the most popular devotional texts of the sixteenth century, regards 'filthy sensuality', as he puts it, as the most debilitating vice. 'Think how foul, how base, how unworthy of any man is this pleasure', he says, 'which reduces us from an image of divinity to the level, not merely of animals, but even to that of swine, he goats, dogs, and the most brutish of brutes' (Erasmus, 1963, p. 177). Erasmus loathed the loss of control intrinsic not only to the sexual encounter but the experience of falling in love more generally: 'imagine to yourself just how ridiculous, how completely monstrous it is to be in love: to grow pale and thin, to shed tears, to fawn upon and play the beggar to the most stinking tart, to croak and howl at her doors all night, to hang upon the nod of a mistress, to endure a silly woman's dominating you' (1963, p. 179).

Apart from Erasmus's evident difficulty with loss of control in love and sexual encounter, he is also clearly plagued by the body–spirit split that runs like a recurring theme through these statements. Being adamant that one ought to love one's wife not so much because she offers sexual pleasure, Erasmus advises that 'you love her most deeply because in her you have seen the likeness of Christ, that is to say, goodness, modesty, sobriety, chastity'. And, having seen Christ in her, it will now be possible to 'love her ... not in herself but in Christ', which means that 'in reality you love Christ in her; and so at last you love *in a spiritual sense*' (1963, p. 83). If, after that, anyone should still be in any

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<sup>8</sup>This account of Hildegard's views on human sexuality is based on Miles, 1989, pp. 99-105.

doubt regarding the value of sexual intercourse within marriage, Erasmus obligingly dispels any such uncertainty (1963, p. 182):

If you are married, think how admirable a thing is an undefiled bed, and try as hard as you can to make your marriage resemble the most holy wedlock of Christ and his Church, whose likeness it bears. That is to say, see to it that it has as little lewdness as possible, and as much fruitfulness, for in no status of life is it not most abominable to be a slave to lust.

Erasmus leaves us in no doubt that *any* sexual longing is lust. There is no permissible erotic desire of any kind. There is no room here for the celebration of human sexuality that permeates the Song of Songs.

Nelson, in a discussion of Christian attitudes to the body and human sexuality (1978, pp. 37-69), shows that there were two types of dualism at work in these attitudes. The first, 'spiritualistic dualism', the proposed dichotomy between body and spirit, is typically traced back to Plato. 'It seems that so long as we are alive', Plato once said, 'we shall continue closest to knowledge if we avoid as much as we can all contact and association with the body, except when they are absolutely necessary' (from *The Last Days of Socrates*, as quoted in Nelson, 1978, p. 46). The second type of dualism Nelson calls 'sexist dualism', noting that the systematic denigration and subordination of women to which this refers is also frequently known as 'patriarchal dualism'. Both types, spiritualistic and sexist dualism, have been amply demonstrated in our historical survey.

Nelson shows them both to be forms of 'sexual alienation', which manifests itself as alienation experienced within the self, alienation from neighbour and alienation from God. Alienation within the self takes the form of 'alienation of spirit from body, of reason from emotions, of "higher life" from "fleshly life"' (Nelson, 1978, p. 46). And with women having been associated with emotion, body and sensuality, that first level of alienation finds expression in their subordination, thus leading to the second level of alienation, that from neighbour. Ruether has similarly argued that 'the male ideology of the "feminine" that we have inherited in the West seems to be rooted in a self-alienated experience of the body and the world' (1975, pp. 3-4). Thirdly, body alienation is also alienation from God. 'If through our religious socialization we have been taught that our sexuality is an impediment to the life with God', then, as Nelson points out, hostility toward God may ensue, 'because of God's [apparent] rejection of that which seems ... to be inevitably part of us' (1978, p. 44).

Much more would have to be said about the roots of the dualistic thinking that has plagued Christianity ever since its beginnings. However, it should at least be noted that sexist dualism, the patriarchal worldview responsible for the denigration and subordination of women, is clearly observable in the biblical writings themselves, which, while offering some critiques of patriarchy as well as glimpses of a redeemed humanity in which it will have been overcome, are influenced by the prevailing cultural norms of the

day. Traces of spiritualistic dualism appear to be visible in some of the New Testament writings, but these were clearly exacerbated by subsequent dualistic theologians.

Christian statements regarding human sexuality need to be understood, at least in part, as reactions against the beliefs and practices of paganism. However, the unqualified equation of any sexual desire with lust that we met in some of the Christian writers is indicative of deep and pervasive dualistic influences. As Nelson points out, drawing attention to a key aspect of the struggle to make sense of the body and human sexuality, these writers 'typically assigned sexuality not to the good order of creation but to the results of the Fall. Given this, the image of God could not reside in the whole person but only in the individual's unfallen or spiritual state, divorced from the body and its sexuality' (1978, p. 52).

Another issue, which is raised by those earlier Christian perspectives that we surveyed, most acutely those of Augustine and Erasmus, and deserves full discussion in its own right, can only be mentioned here in passing. The issue I have in mind is that of male control. As Miles (1989, p. 115) has emphasised, it is evident from these accounts (and others not included here) that in order 'to maintain the autonomy required for ruling the home and for exercising public responsibility, men must not ... love too much, or permit themselves to enjoy sexual and social relationships of mutuality and interdependence'. Miles's comment touches upon the consequences of the alienation from self and neighbour mentioned earlier. Nelson outlines these in some detail (1978, pp. 65-68), but as we need to move on and explore how the Song of Songs might help us overcome some of those harmful perspectives on human sexuality, I only wish to point to the irony that control is precisely what needs to be surrendered if we are to enjoy our sexuality.

### **A Return to the Garden**

We now return to the garden, the garden of metaphor that is the Song of Songs, but also, albeit more briefly, the garden of Eden. As we saw earlier, the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2-3 has played a key role for the Christian understanding of the body, human sexuality and gender relationships. Tribble, who has offered an influential counter-patriarchal reading of the garden of Eden story (1978a), has also presented an intriguing interpretation of the Song of Songs that contrasts the garden of the Song with that of Eden (1978b).

It is in the garden of Eden that male and female first become one flesh, as is briefly noted by the narrator (Gen. 2:24). 'Now in another garden', says Tribble (1978b, p. 111), 'the lovers themselves praise at length the joys of intercourse'. The senses, which in Eden led to the eating of the forbidden fruit – the woman *saw* that the tree 'was a delight to the eyes' (Gen. 3:6), she *listened* to the serpent and she *tasted* the fruit – in the Song

are celebrated and affirmed. Love and lovemaking are sweet to the taste, like delicious fruits and wine; the lovers praise the fragrance of each other's perfumes and bodies; they delight in the touch of their embraces; a glance of her eyes leads the man to lose his heart; the sound of him approaching is thrilling to her.

Plants, obviously, are found in both gardens. In Eden we encounter 'every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food' (Gen. 2:9), while in the Song all kinds of plants abound: lilies and lotuses, henna, pomegranates and apricot trees. Importantly, 'among these many plants, no tree of disobedience grows .... Instead, the lovers offer an open invitation to eat freely of every tree of the garden' (Trible, 1978b, p. 112). There is an abundance of water as well. While the garden of Eden is watered by a river flowing out of Eden (Gen. 2:10-14), the man in the Song describes his beloved as 'a garden spring, a well of living water, flowing streams from Lebanon' (Song 4:15).

Animals, too, feature in both gardens. In Eden, their initial role is to point to the lack of a partner for the man (Gen. 2:18-20), while the serpent not only plays a key part in the unfolding disaster but even becomes humanity's perpetual enemy (3:14-15). The Song knows no such enmity between the human couple and the mare, the gazelles, stags, doves, lions and leopards that populate its lines. Here, the animals are evoked for their beauty, agility, spontaneity, playfulness and wildness, all of which characterise the human couple and their erotic longing for one another. Only the foxes are causing some trouble, but they, apparently, can be captured (2:15).

'Work and play', says Trible (1978b, p. 114), 'belong together in both the garden of creation and the garden of eroticism. To till and keep the garden of Eden was delight until the primeval couple disobeyed'. In the Song, the woman transforms work into pleasure. Having been told to look after the family's vineyards, she says that her own vineyard she hasn't kept (Song 1:6). In the end, it is her lover who looks after, and enjoys the fruit of, her vineyard (8:12). The man, for his part, is a shepherd, 'but for the woman his occupation is the play of intercourse' (Trible, 1978b, p. 115), for he pastures among the lotuses (2:16; 6:3), which represent her own body (2:1-2).

Perhaps the most intriguing allusion to the garden of Eden story appears in 7:11 (10): 'I'm my lover's, and his desire is for me'. The term 'desire' (תִּשְׁׁוּׁאָה *těšûqāh*), which is found only three times in the Old Testament, also occurs in Genesis 3:16<sup>9</sup> where the woman is told that her desire shall be for her husband, who shall 'rule over' her (מִשְׁׁל־בִּי *msl-bē*). Whereas in Genesis 3:16 the woman experiences desire for her husband that is not reciprocated but is met by male domination, in Song 7:11 (10) it is the man who desires his beloved in a context of true mutuality. As Trible (1978b, p. 117) points out, in Genesis 3:16 'her desire became his dominion'; in Song 7:11 (10) 'his desire becomes

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<sup>9</sup>The only other occurrence is in Genesis 4:7.

her delight', and thus one of the consequences of the disobedience in Eden is 'redeemed through the recovery of mutuality in the garden of eroticism'.

Trible ends her reading of the Song of Songs by expressing the hope that the cherubim of Genesis 3:24 would reappear to guard the garden of the Song, keeping out 'those who lust, moralize, legislate, or exploit' and turning away the literalists (1978b, p. 120). She does not specifically comment on the failure of large parts of the Christian tradition to come to terms with the Song's subject matter of physical erotic yearning or indeed the potential implications of the couple's enjoyment of a relationship of mutuality for gender relations in the church and society.

However, given the immense influence of dualistic patriarchal interpretations of Genesis 2–3 on Christianity's understanding of women, the body and human sexuality, interpretations that saw that text, read from the dual perspectives of spiritualistic and sexist dualism, as normative for the church and society, Tribble's interpretation of the Song in relation to the garden of Eden story is highly suggestive. Not only does it challenge the assumption that Genesis 2–3, however one might read that text, should have the last word in matters regarding the body, sexuality and gender; it also sheds more light on the weakness of allegorical readings of the Song, which all too often not only shied away from its physicality but also evaded the text's uncomfortable implications for gender politics in the church and society.

### **The Body, Sensuality and Sexuality**

Engagement with the Song of Songs invites a reassessment of human sexuality and our relationship with the body. In fact, the poetry of the Song more directly invites the simple enjoyment and celebration of our sexuality. It is our Christian history, prevailing attitudes within the church and the church's on-going difficulty with communicating a life-affirming vision of human sexuality that call for such a reassessment. As Nelson, writing in the late 1970s, points out, 'because both sexist and spiritualistic dualisms have so plagued Christianity, many people have left the church to seek the wholeness of their sexual humanity elsewhere' (1978, p. 73).

About thirty-five years on, the church is still not known for promoting a vision of life that embraces, affirms and celebrates sexual desire. This is not to say that no such statements have been issued – they have – but merely to recognise that the common perception of the church in this area appears not to have changed all that much. One reason for this would seem to be that sexuality, with one exception, still continues to be a largely neglected aspect in the church. This is almost tragic in the context of a society that tends to invest sexual relationships with enormous expectations.

To be sure, those expectations are frequently deeply unrealistic. As, for instance, Seddon (2010, p. 9) notes, 'the demand that sex determine human meaning, that a basic

part of our being be the whole, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of disaster. Sex cannot bear that weight of expectations; souls and hearts soon become wounded'. Galloway (1997b, p. 13) has made a similar point, stressing that

if people do not hear the word that says, 'yes, you are accepted' through the meaningful framework of faith; if they do not hear it through their belonging within an accepting community; if they do not hear it through their closeness to the land; then people increasingly and only seek and hope to hear it in their personal, and especially sexual, relationships. This is too great a burden for any relationship to bear.

The church has an important role to play in maintaining that our sexuality cannot determine human meaning. That would indeed be far too great a burden for what *nonetheless* is an essential part of our humanity and as such deserves far more attention. It is surprising and lamentable that, in a church that believes in the goodness of the divine creation as well as the divine incarnation, 'the fundamentals of human emotion and bodiliness seem neither worthy nor appropriate avenues to the divine, and so, especially in the context of public worship, any mention, let alone celebration, of human sexuality is virtually taboo', as Graham (2000, p. 95) has lamented. Or as Turner (1997, p. 97) says, 'rarely does a priest ... celebrate his God-given sexuality, talk of it with joy, joke about it, relate it to prayer and the love of God'.

The traditional exception to the common neglect of sexuality in the church concerns sexual ethics. When sex does become an issue, it is almost invariably in connection with the question of what is or is not permissible. This, too, is problematic, however. In pointing this out, I do not intend to downplay the importance of sexual ethics. After all, the erotic energy that drives us all can easily be misdirected. It all too frequently is, often with disastrous consequences. It is important, therefore, that we distinguish between desires 'which can be fulfilled with constructive and enriching effects for ourselves and others, and those which if acted upon might impoverish and destroy' (thus Nelson, 1978, p. 82). As Henriksen (2011b, p. 191) notes, 'the dark sides of desire' concern 'the destruction of the relational', and we must not become blind to the fact that some forms of sex are violent, painful and harmful. Sexual ethics remains important.

However, how can we, the church, expect anyone to listen to us in matters of sexual ethics if we are unable to offer a healthy, life-affirming vision of our common humanity that celebrates the essential goodness of human embodiment, including our sexuality, our sensuousness, our erotic longing? It is essential, I believe, that we develop, sustain and communicate such a vision alongside and indeed *prior to* the entirely appropriate suggestion that sex isn't everything and the equally important warning that our erotic yearning can be misdirected to disastrous effect, or we have little to offer to our contemporary society.

Interestingly, in his chapter entitled 'Sexual Salvation', which includes a sustained discussion of sensuousness, Nelson (1978, p. 84) also takes the Song of Songs as his

point of departure, noting that it is a 'hymn to the beauty of the body and the goodness of creation, to the sheer joy of bodily existence and its pleasures'. In contrast to spiritualistic dualism, the two lovers of the Song 'embrace their sexuality joyously and shamelessly'. In contrast to sexist dualism, 'the Song displays a notable absence of male domination and female subordination' (p. 85). Nelson unequivocally recognises what might be perceived as some of the Song's limitations, namely that it 'borders on the idyllic' and on 'sexual myth' in that it celebrates an 'eroticism which knows no sin, no prohibitions, no disobedience, no betrayal'. And yet, he maintains, the book 'stands as an important and unique scriptural portrait of sensuousness' (p. 85).

Nelson (1978, p. 20) points out that 'the body is the *means* by which I can know objects, persons, and events'. More specifically, it is by means of the senses, so suspect to Ambrose and others, that we are enabled to transcend ourselves and relate to God's creation. Nelson (1978, p. 86) therefore calls for an approach of gospel, rather than law, to be applied to the area of human sexuality, an approach that trusts in the Creator's design of our senses and the resulting 'erotic dynamism', which is aimed 'at personal sexual communion' rather than the 'impersonal sexual hedonism' that those who condemn sensual pleasure are so worried about. Given our senses' capacity to bring us into communion with the other, O'Donohue (2004, p. 238) is right to emphasise that 'the sensuous is sacred. For too long in the Christian tradition', he says, 'we have demonized the sensuous and pitted the "dim sense" against the "majestic soul"'. This turned God into an abstract ghost, aloof and untouchable; and it made the senses the gateways to sin'.

Exploring the notion of pleasure in more detail, Nelson (1978, p. 87) notes that 'in pleasure of whatever sort the will seems to recede and the ego surrenders some of its control over the body. Self-conscious deliberation is replaced by absorption into feeling'. 'In the climax of sexual communion' there is self-abandonment and what Nelson describes as 'a willingness to risk the depths of experience'. As the psychiatrist Alexander Lowen (1975, p. 32) has emphasised, 'pleasure cannot be possessed. One must give one's self over to the pleasure, that is, allow the pleasure to take possession of one's being'. There is an unspoken assumption here that surrender and loss of control are positive and a source of well-being rather than something to be dreaded and be repulsed by, as Augustine and Erasmus so clearly were. The Song of Songs, of course, presents us with a male lover, who, as Carr (2003, p. 140) underlines, is 'willing to be vulnerable to love, to yield to it, and to be captivated by a powerful, incredible woman'.

'In sensual pleasure', says Nelson (1978, p. 89), 'I enjoy and love my bodily self and in this experience realize the coincidence of self and body. Dualism is overcome in reunion'. And this is a healing experience, both for us and our beloved partner, for the momentarily-healed self 'is able to experience the depth of communion with the partner'. 'There seems to be a spontaneous movement from my own enjoyment of myself to my

enjoyment of my partner, and in this spontaneity there is something of a miracle of transformation.’ Nelson (1978, p. 90) therefore concludes that ‘such sensual pleasure is a gift of divine grace’, for it is ‘God’s invitation to reunion – with both self and the loved companion’. Indeed, Nelson goes a step further and maintains that ‘in this reunion God is experienced, whether there is consciousness of the divine name or not’.

At the outset of our reflections on human sexuality and the body, we began with some comments on the Song of Songs that found in it notions of sensuous desire and self-delighting play. While the former has already been explored, the issue of play deserves at least some brief consideration. In the Song, the concept of self-delighting play is perhaps most evocatively and delightfully expressed in the image of the man as a gazelle who is invited to frolic on the mountains representing the woman’s body (4:6; 8:14). Playfulness, Nelson (1987, p. 90) points out, once again involves surrendering control, for play is often unstructured and egalitarian. Cooperation, openness and freedom are some of its key features. Callahan (1968, p. 37) maintains that ‘play is intimately related to ... human wholeness and healthy equilibrium’. Sexual play, which requires and encourages trust, surrender and spontaneity, is a gift and a sign of grace that contributes to that wholeness and equilibrium.

In a move that takes us back to our earlier consideration of beauty, Nelson (1978, p. 92) also stresses that ‘our awareness of creation and its beauty is a sexual awareness’. It is precisely our sexuality, our eros, that ‘invites us into communion with other realities in creation’ – hence the Song of Song’s celebration of the beauty of both the lovers and their erotic yearning for one another *and* of the world all around them. O’Donohue (2004, p. 239), for his part, has pointed out that ‘when we begin to awaken to the beauty which is the Sensuous God, we discover the holiness of our bodies and our earth’. However, since ‘there is [such] an intimate, unbreakable link between sexuality and a sense of beauty’ (thus Sherrard, 1976, p. 42), it may come as no surprise that Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225) thought that natural beauty is best concealed, being ‘dangerous to those who look upon it’ (as quoted in Nelson, 1978, p. 92).

### **Concluding Reflections**

It seems to me necessary to end with the express recognition that these reflections on human sexuality have been quite narrowly focused on the celebration of human embodiment, sensuality and sexuality that the love poems of the Song of Songs invite and the shortcomings of the Christian tradition demand. This, in other words, has not been a full-fledged discussion of sexuality in the context of Christian theology and ethics. While we have briefly touched upon issues such as sexual ethics and the notion of control of sexuality, both those subjects warrant far more extensive exploration.

The burning issue of homosexuality was not even mentioned. The same is true of other aspects, such as the limits that physical, emotional, psychological or spiritual wounds might impose upon our enjoyment of our sexuality. Our discussion might also have given the impression that, to put it in Moberly's words, 'to explore, express and enhance one's sexuality through "sex" ... is indispensable to one's growth and development and happiness as a human being'. As Moberly (2000, pp. 253-254) rightly points out, that is not true: "'sex" is not a necessity, nor even a priority', he maintains. 'What matters most in human life can be achieved without it, and missed with it'. And that being the case, the church also needs to 'find a language that speaks to the many committed and devoted Christians who are celibate either by choice or through circumstances, and affirm singleness as an authentic and positive lifestyle', as Shanahan (1997, p. 92) has urged.

However, I would like to end by saying that I make no apology for focusing on the celebration of human embodiment and the enjoyment of our sensuality and sexuality. As already said, this focus not only reflects the nature of the love poems found in the Song of Songs; it also seems to me demanded by the deficiencies of our Christian tradition in these matters.

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## The Force That Drives Us

In our opening session, I briefly defined eros as desire, suggesting that it is that God-given force that takes us out of ourselves and drives us to connect with the world. In our concluding reflections today, I wish to elaborate on that definition and look in some more detail at eros or desire – I shall use those terms synonymously – in relation not only to our sexuality but also in connection with our spirituality. Having looked at eros, desire, sexuality and spirituality, we will then, again fairly briefly, return to the question of how to read the Song of Songs.

### Understanding Eros

Desire, the urge that drives us to transcend ourselves and seek for connection with other human beings, the world and God, is often defined in terms of lack. We are propelled to move out of ourselves because of a perceived lack or deficit. This is most obvious perhaps at the biological level. As Henriksen has noted, desire ‘directs us toward objects that satisfy our primary biological aims: ... to eat, breathe, and procreate’ (2011a, p. 5).

This dimension of desire underlies the Hebrew term **נֶפֶשׁ** (*nepeš*), usually translated ‘soul’, which, as we saw when we looked at the body at one of our Residential Weekends this year, denotes ‘the greedy, never satisfied, hungry and thirsty, devouring and air-breathing throat’, to put it in the words of Schroer and Staubli in their book *Body Symbolism in the Bible* (2001, p. 57). The **נֶפֶשׁ** (*nepeš*), they say, ‘becomes the symbol of the needy, greedy human being’, the ‘creature that pants for and craves life’ (*ibid.*). We explored this in relation to passages that talk about physical hunger and thirst (Ps. 107:8-9), spiritual need (Prov. 25:25) and the sex drive (Gen. 34:2-3). This is not the place to rehearse that discussion, but it is interesting to note that the perception of desire as lack can be observed also in the Hebrew understanding of the human being that finds expression in the range of meanings associated with the term **נֶפֶשׁ** (*nepeš*).

Eros, desire, is thus directed not only at sexual fulfilment. It more generally connects us with the world around us by making us reach out beyond ourselves, driven by physical, emotional, spiritual needs. As Carr (2003, p. 9) notes, eros comprises ‘all sorts of core desires: certainly the sexual, but also intellectual, artistic, and spiritual yearnings’. He therefore advocates ‘a wider concept of eros that ... embrace[s] not only sexual passion, but work, play, deep friendship, art, and many other sorts of profound pleasure’. Other instructive examples of eros mentioned by Carr include ‘the sensual joy of a shared meal or an abiding thirst for justice’ (*ibid.*). It is important to note this wide range of desires, not only because this prevents too narrow an association of eros with sex, but also because it helps us appreciate the extent to which eros, this God-given force, permeates and energises our entire being.

We depend on this eros, because it ‘opens up the world and its significance to us’, as Henriksen (2011a, p. 3) points out. Or, in the words of Davis, ‘the erotic dynamism of bodily love is ... an intrinsic element in the movement of an embodied person in openness toward the plenitude of reality, toward God’. (1976, p. 126). The longings that some earlier Christian writers could only conceive of in depressingly negative terms as lust, even when experienced in the context of a committed, loving partnership, are, in the full sense of the term, a vital part of what makes us human. In *Nox*, a moving epitaph written after her brother’s death, the poet and classicist Anne Carson sums up her mother’s reaction very simply in the words ‘all desire left the world’ (2010, n. p.). We recognise such a situation, when all desire has gone, leaving us depleted, without hope and with nothing to look forward to, as depression. The God-given force of eros is essential for our survival and well-being, physically, emotionally and spiritually. We have every reason to celebrate, cherish and be grateful for this live-giving gift.

But our desires are not always met. Even when they are, we quickly desire again. And we always desire more. This can be problematic, and it is an aspect of our humanity that is shamelessly exploited in our consumerist culture. And yet, as Henriksen (2011a, p. 6) notes, ‘not only is desire for the good, but it is for the good that desire cannot be satisfied once and for all, as this makes us able to participate more fully and more continuously in the goodness of the world’. Without desire, we would lose all interest in the world, retreat into ourselves, starve and wither away. ‘The existence and maintenance of desire ... [also] allows for further development’ (Henriksen, 2011a, p. 19). It is eros that drives us to work hard, write better sermons, aim to become more pastorally sensitive, build more beautiful and more environmentally friendly cars and houses ....

Whatever we do, our desires can never be satisfied, which points us beyond the present world and what it has to offer. As Carr (2003, p. 149) says, ‘God always lies beyond even our best erotic connections. The most we experience in life are partial tastes of ultimate fulfillment, brief hints of the greater good for which we long. To forget this is to risk loving things as if they were God.’ Paz (1995, p. 15), noting that ‘eroticism is first and foremost a thirst for otherness’, similarly points out that ‘the supernatural is the supreme otherness’ and hence the ultimate target of our desire.

I began by defining desire in relation to lack and need, and yet in talking about the drive to write better sermons I have already begun to undermine that definition. Eros is insufficiently understood if it is only perceived as driven by lack. Eros is also gift (Shults, 2011, p. viii). Most fundamentally, eros is ‘the energy through which creation emerges from the divine’ (Farley, 2011, p. 135). The world we inhabit is an expression of God’s eros, God’s desire to give. Farley (2011, p. 136) describes eros as ‘a divine love ceaselessly, infinitely pouring out the good, exuberantly sharing the beauty of being with all that can be’. Eros is a ‘paradoxical “zeal” of love that abandons itself in order to express

itself'. And God's erotic action in creating and sustaining the creation becomes our model and vocation, as again Farley (2011, p. 140) stresses: 'it is the vocation of Christian communities to participate in the love by which the divine Eros cherishes the world'.

### **Eros, Sexuality and Spirituality**

In his discussion of sexuality, Nelson (1978, p. 35) comments that 'the physical intertwining of selves is accompanied by an emotional and spiritual intertwining'. This might seem obvious to us, but Christianity has, as we saw, not always been good at holding the physical and spiritual together. The consequences have been disastrous. One can only lament the hundreds of generations that have been told that physical desire is dirty, sinful and depraved. Refusal or inability to recognise God's good gifts for what they are can only lead to impoverishment, physically *and* spiritually, as the two cannot be separated.

It is therefore important to 'envision eros as a category that ... [integrates] sexuality and spirituality' (Carr, 2003, p. 145). As Walsh (2000, p. 193) suggests, 'if there can be a unity of the spiritual and the sexual impulses, then we have come a long way toward healing the rift between religion and sex, between the spirit and the body'. After all, given that both 'the erotic and the spiritual forces are foundational energies within the human being', an integration of sexuality and spirituality, again in the words of Walsh, 'could well be restorative, ushering in a newfound surge of energy toward living' (*ibid.*).

One feature that unites the sexual and spiritual forces, rather unsurprisingly, as both are expressions of the life-giving eros, is their desire for connection, or more profoundly, for true communion. As Nelson (1978, p. 34) says, 'in its deepest experience sexuality is the desire for and the expression of communion – of the self with other body-selves and with God'. Carr (2003, p. 148) similarly notes that we 'were made to love God *and* others. We are first and foremost erotic creatures. We are made to be grounded in love of God above all, but we are impelled by our love of God toward erotic connection with others as well.' Indeed, it is largely, though not exclusively, through our 'sensuous connection with another person, a poem, a piece of nature, the world' that we experience God's love (Carr, 2003, p. 149).

However, desire, just as every other divine gift, can become tainted. Not only is there a danger of it being misdirected, desire can also become closed. Consider the example of sexual desire, which, as Henriksen (2011a, p. 9) points out,

can relate to the other in a way that sees her only as a means for gratification of immediate needs. The other is then fully determined by my intentions for her, and she is present as a mere object of my desire. ... However, sexual desire can also appear as a desire for the other's desire for me, and for my desire for being something for her. ... [This] makes both of us appear as subjects.

Henriksen uses the helpful concepts of opening and closing desire. Closing desire is self-centred and refuses to see the other as a subject in her own right. This is deeply prob-

lematic for any number of reasons, not least ethical ones, but it is also fundamentally incongruous, for, as Williams (2000, p. 153) observes, 'there is in reality no self ... without the presence of the other'. We can only perceive of ourselves as a self because of, and over against of, the other. 'But', says Williams, 'that other must precisely *be* other – not the fulfilment of what I think I want, the answer to my lack' (*ibid.*).

Closing or 'control-oriented' desire ultimately 'is an expression of lack of trust in God' since it 'strives to remain in control of the given world' (see Henriksen, 2011a, p. 21). By contrast, Henriksen describes 'faith as desire for God' as an opening desire, because it 'opens [us] up to the uncontrollable' (p. 17) and leads us to 'accept that this desire can never be fully satisfied' (p. 15). Expressing an opening desire thus makes us vulnerable (p. 10), as has also been noted by Carr (2003, p. 147), who maintains that

eros is a fundamental spiritual impulse to reach out from ourselves for connection, to become vulnerable, often against our other instincts. Our sexual eros impels us to seek out bodily connection with others, risking suffering in the process. ... Human eros ... pushes us out from safe limits and makes us risk ourselves with others.

These are wise and timely words, for Augustine and Erasmus were not the only ones to have been addicted to the use and maintenance of control. And women have not been the only ones to suffer the consequences, although the seriousness and pervasiveness of the consequences for women can hardly be overstated. And yet, the ones suffering from and under that control and those exercising their urge to control have *all* been severely harmed in the process, all too often physically, but even more frequently, it would seem, emotionally and spiritually. Surrender of control, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, is an indispensable condition for physical, emotional and spiritual health and well-being. It is as essential in a mutually enriching and life-giving sexual relationship as it is in our relationship with God.

When we express opening desire, 'we put ourselves in the hands of the other', and this 'implies trust, a vital element of faith', as Henriksen (2011a, p. 15) notes. All our relationships, with our spouse, children, friends, at work, with God, thrive on trust and are severely harmed by the urge to control. God's emptying of himself in the erotic acts that brought about creation and salvation invites us to do likewise, to surrender control, allow ourselves to be vulnerable, express an opening desire that allows the other to be genuinely other and surprise us with what they have to give rather than being determined by our perceived needs. Curiously, opening desire increases when it is satisfied (Henriksen, 2011a, p. 26), for, as Moore (1989, p. 11) has so aptly observed, 'one can always be more trustful, more connected, which means more desirous'.

### **Nourishing Eros**

Carr (2003, p. 177) expresses an invitation to a life marked by eros, proposing that

with what time is left to us, we are called to settle for nothing less than a passionate love affair with God and with life, embracing God and the creation through which God shimmers, living madly in the fantasy that this universe is not purposeless, but that we are called toward the drama and pain of life and love lived to the fullest.

But how do we nourish this eros? I was recently struck by a phrase in A. S. Byatt's latest book. The phrase appears in connection with a character who had coped well throughout the period of World War II but found life afterwards difficult. It was dailiness, says Byatt, that defeated her (2011, p. 152). This, it seems to me, might just be one of the biggest challenges for many of us. Dailiness can choke that divine eros within us, when we fail to notice and hence to connect with the beauty around us: the beauty of nature, our spouse and children, our friends, our work, even the beauty of God.

I do not intend to lecture you on how to respond to the dailiness that can so easily numb our lives. Possible answers are as obvious as numerous: prayer and contemplation, reading of scripture and other inspiring and challenging literature, time spent with friends, quality time with family, with one's spouse – although all these can be, and sadly not infrequently are, infected by that virus of dailiness as well. 'Often', says O'Donohue (2004, p. 175), 'it takes a huge crisis or trauma to crack the dead shell that has grown ever more solid around us. Painful as that may be, it does resurrect the longing of the neglected soul.' Some of us here, I'm sure, know only too well what O'Donohue is talking about.

I want to share one thought with you though, having come across a phrase in my recent reading that got lodged in my memory. Farley, in her article 'Beguiled by Beauty: The Reformation of Desire for Faith and Theology', speaks of 'the practice of mindfulness' (2011, p. 143). The practice of mindfulness! If carefully and persistently observed, it can help us to take in the beauty around us. I must admit that there were moments when spending all that time with the Song of Songs felt like an enormous indulgence. Are there not more important things to worry about? It would be so easy to argue that there are, and yet I hope that our explorations have shown the Song and our careful reading of it to have been of real value. Most importantly, in this context, the Song can open our eyes, hearts and minds to beauty, the beauty of an erotic relationship, but also the beauty of the world in which we find ourselves.

It is important to make time for beauty so that the divine eros within us, understood in all its magnificent richness of giving and receiving, can be rekindled. As Carr (2003, p. 10) points out, 'both sexuality and spirituality require space in one's life to grow. Neither flourish amidst constant busy-ness and exhaustion.'

### **Reading the Song of Songs**

This leaves us with the question of how the Song is best read. I want to come back briefly, in this context, to the issue of allegorical interpretation. Walsh (2000, p. 192) points

out that 'allegorical interpretations that replace the text's plain sense of sexual desire with a supposed better pious reading [...] impose a spiritual agenda rather than discovering it within the text itself'. The spiritual agenda that has all too often been superimposed upon the Song has been that of a dual dualism, spiritualistic dualism, which values spirit over body, and sexist dualism, which values male over female. The Song is a deeply spiritual book, not only or more so when it is read with reference to God's love, but precisely in its joyous appreciation and celebration of the gift of human embodiment and its expression in erotic longing and sexual encounter. Body and spirit are both part of God's good creation. They must not and cannot be separated. As again Walsh (2000, p. 191) notes, the Song is deeply spiritual in that it 'is concerned with the responses of the soul to life and its pleasures'.

It seems to me that there are essentially two ways of reading the Song that have the potential of holding body and spirit together. The first type are mystical readings that read it as an expression of God's or Christ's love for us but with a deep awareness and appreciation of the text's erotic dimension in relation to both body and spirit. Mystical readings, as Walsh (2000, p. 198) observes, thrive on the basis of 'the affective similarity between sexual want and the spiritual quest'. Alternatively, others might wish to focus on the Song's joyous celebration of physical longing and love but keenly conscious of the spiritual dimension of human sexuality, which engages body and spirit while also pointing beyond itself to the giver of life who alone can satisfy our deepest desires. Ultimately, these two types of reading arrive at the same destination, having merely begun from different starting points. In the Song, as once more Walsh (2000, p. 212) has pointed out, 'all the meanings about fruit, sex, and spiritual hunger coexist'.

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