

**No Sex Please, We're Christians**  
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Society, said the Archbishop of Canterbury a few months ago, is obsessed with sex. Society may well be, but the church, it seems to me, avoids the subject altogether. It simply doesn't happen, does it? Well not in nice Christian marriages. To judge by many a church teaching programme, we tend to hope that young people will pick up our moral standards by osmosis. We leave them guessing, and what they tend to pick up are some extremely negative vibes. Or as one student at our church said recently, "You're always telling us to wait, but never tell us if its worth waiting for". Fair point. We bang the drum on fornication, but rarely sing in celebration of the great gift of marital love.

Why are we so coy? Afraid of upsetting the single? They, I often feel, are more in touch with their sexuality than their married friends. They have no choice but to face the issue, and it's hardly a fair acknowledgement of their struggle and pain if we suggest that they're not really missing anything anyway. Is it because sex is such a private matter? That kind of intimacy must be, but I'm not advocating sharing all the gory details, simply having a more honest, open, joyful approach to a vital part of our lives.

But two major hurdles lie in our way. The first is a deep-seated ambivalence to all matters sexual. It's almost a Christian gene passed on through the generations and inherited at new birth. By the time of the early fathers, the Gentile Church, growing in a society steeped in Greek and Roman thought, had divided body and spirit. All bodily functions, especially sex, were considered not quite nice. By the third century Augustine spoke of "the shame which attends all sexual intercourse". Jerome believed marriage was actually harmful. Reading the writings of the early fathers from today's vantage point we can almost feel their revulsion for their sexual fantasies, projected almost inevitably onto we poor unsuspecting females. This is Tertullian in the second century: "And do you not know that you are Eve? You are the devil's gateway: you are the unsealer of that tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law: you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not so valiant enough to attack. You destroyed so easily God's image, man. On account of your desert - that is, death - even the Son of God had to die. And yet you think of nothing but covering your gowns in jewellery? You should always go about in mourning and in rags."

Accepting as we do the responsibility and guilt which was dumped upon us, Christian women have done just that, covering up their latent sexuality with dull colours and drab, unlovely clothes. And it isn't only women who feel squashed beneath the weight of self-condemnation. "There is a wariness and unease in the body language of some Christian men," said Angela Tilby at the Sheffield clergy conference last year. "A tendency to sloping shoulders, wringing hands and a bowed head. Not the straight upward gait of Imam and Rabbi. Compare the Christian minister's wife with her Jewish or Muslim counterpart. She

is clearly a jolly nice woman; well-scrubbed rather than sexy, whereas Mrs Cohen and Mrs Patel frequently manage to be both".

Our bodies, instead of filling us with a sense of delight and wonder, have become a source of embarrassment and shame. In his book "Eros Redeemed", John White speaks of the danger of looking at our naked bodies in the mirror in case we fall in love with them. I've never met anyone vaguely content with, let alone in love with their body. I can't say I'm all that thrilled with what's happening to mine. These days I resist clothes shops with large communal changing rooms. I don't want my daughter's generation to see the damage wreaked by gravity! Nonetheless - despite several gynaecological hiccups - it still functions fairly satisfactorily, thank you.

The saddest example I have come across of the extreme consequences of a negative attitude to nudity was in a letter to "Woman Alive", in response to something I had said in the magazine about how joyful sex should be. A young woman wrote to disagree with me. She said that she and her husband had been so disgusted at the sight of each others naked bodies on their honeymoon that they had never managed to consummate the marriage. It's hard to believe such an attitude should exist today. It does - and I hope they get the help they need.

The second major obstacle to any honest appreciation of our God-given sexuality is the total lack of common ground or comprehension between the sexes on this particular matter. For that reason alone I would quite like to be a man for the day, and wish my husband could be me, because I know that we haven't the faintest idea of what it feels like to be the opposite sex. It's virtually impossible for a woman to appreciate the struggle men have when those biological urges are stimulated several times a day by bill-boards, hoardings, the TV, and newspaper shelves - not to mention the flash of flesh on the pavement. I have a little more sympathy for the early church fathers.

When I was compiling "Made for Each Other", bombarding every man in my orbit from church leaders to the milkman with questions about their sexuality one friend said, "Men think about work some of the time, food most of the time and sex all of the time." Can I quote you by name, I asked. "Certainly not," he said.

Most men I spoke to feared their libido, and wondered whether they were normal. But they never discuss it with each other. It's too loaded, too enmeshed in the complex web of male achievement, success, and virility for them to take the risk of finding out. "Religious men, more than non-religious men," says American psychologist Dr Archibald Hart, "don't talk about their sexuality, so they never get an opportunity to be honest with themselves and with God. And if there's no self-honesty, there can be no integration of the sexual side of a man with his spiritual side. He splits, developing two sides of himself which are continually at war."

It seems to me that the poor souls are buffeted and tossed on the turbulent billows of their rampant male hormones, which carry them helplessly along on the tide, while we women are left behind on the shore with a vague feeling of inadequacy. We do have sexual desire, of course we do, but barely get round to acknowledging its rumblings before being overcome by a torrent of testosterone.

If male sexuality is a mystery for women, how much more is female sexuality for a man. One man said to me, "I used to think, "Why won't she respond? She's gone off me". And then I wondered if she was just being awkward, using sex as a weapon, I suppose. After all, it never happens to couples on the television. Now, after nearly thirty years, I've learned that when she says no it usually means there's some other problem in the relationship we need to look at. I just wish I hadn't had to learn it the hard way, that someone, my father or anyone, had explained to me when I first got married that basic mystery about women."

Women are capable of great passion, of course we are, but we're also extremely complex creatures sexually, martyrs to our hormonal cycles, terrified of unwanted pregnancy, worn with juggling dozens of different demands, heavily dependant on mood and atmosphere. There is no one instant trigger to female arousal, though a man may spend his entire life in search of it. Sorry, but that's the way God made it. In very simplified terms, for women intimacy is the way to sex, and for men sex is the way to intimacy, and that can cause a great deal of heartache and confusion.

The truth is that despite our so-called "open society", despite what the Archbishop rightly calls our unhealthy obsession with sex, we are more secretive about our sexuality, more repressed than ever. No area is more fraught for the Christian, more beset with the landmines of shame, fear, hypocrisy and confusion. The fact that church ministers sometimes fail to handle their sexuality appropriately, particularly when they confuse it with power, only adds to our general unease. We find it hard to believe that that major erogenous zone of ours, the imagination, is as much part of God's holy creation as the other bits of our selves we like so much better, so we hack it off and consign it to the dustbin - only this severed limb won't lie down and die. It waits to be owned and embraced before we can lead fully integrated lives.

In Judaism body, mind and spirit were never split from each other. Sexual shame is foreign to the Jews. Except in morals, there is no such thing as a Judeo-Christian attitude to sex. The religion which gave birth to one of the most erotic love poems ever written is light years away from one dogged by the idea that sex was the most unfortunate mistake God ever made. The Song of Songs, belly buttons, boobs and other bumps included, is the only book of the Bible to appear in its entirety in the Jewish Prayer Book. But where is the preacher who will dare to tackle it without resorting to analogy?

Perhaps we're just too intense about it all. Sex was an incredibly funny thing for God to

create. One of the Jewish holy books says that after creation was finished, he watched Adam and Eve enjoying sexual intercourse. That is what prompted him to say that his handiwork was good. In other words, "That idea of mine has certainly gone down well". True or not, there is no doubt that God gave human beings a special form of play, with a twinkle in his eye - probably to prevent us from becoming too pompous!

The Hebrew word for marriage is "kiddushim", a plural variation of the word "kaddosh" or holy, and there is no doubt that it refers to one particular aspect of married life. "Holy" for the Jew does not mean "put on a pedestal", or removed from everyday life. It means special, something to be enjoyed and appreciated as often as possible, especially on joyous occasions like festivals. That's why Jewish tradition says a man must give his wife pleasure on the Sabbath. Nowhere does it say that he is entitled to the same. Who said the female orgasm was a 1960s secular discovery? In the entire animal kingdom only human females experience sexual pleasure. It must surely be one of God's special gifts.

The tragedy is that we are so often robbed of God's best. Christians quickly learn to mistrust their senses and deny their sensuality. We cover our basic British prudery with a thin veneer of tight-lipped Christian puritanism. We stalwartly ignore the subject of sexuality altogether and young people in our churches are left to assume they were found under the nearest gooseberry bush, or if there was a moment of passion which led to their sitting in the pew, it was unfortunate incident over and done with a long time ago.

One of my greatest hopes for my children is that they will grow up knowing I am as filled with passion for their father now, as much, if not more than I was on the day we married, enjoying more and more the great gift of our union. What more could I wish for them in their marriages?