

Human dignity and sexual behaviour – A theological perspective

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ABSTRACT

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This article compares the sex ethic of Scripture with the anthropological values that underlie modern sexual morality and gives guidelines for a responsible sex ethics that can safeguard human dignity. As point of departure it states that the biblical view of sexuality must be understood from the perspective of creation and re-creation and not the fall. The creation narratives teach that humanity possesses qualities of sameness and difference that constitutes our being. Sexuality forms the dynamic which bonds the dialectic of sameness and difference into a unity of persons. The article concludes that the African concept of gender, the radical freedom concept of secular society, the utilitarian view of sex, and the postmodern view that sexual behaviour and marriage are social constructs, aggravate sexual promiscuity. In order to fight HIV/AIDS and preserve human dignity the exclusiveness of the sex act, the importance of faithfulness and the sanctity of marriage must be proclaimed.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sexual identity and human dignity are closely related to each other. Grenz (1990:4) rightly states that sexuality runs deeper than the physical features that allow the reproductive function. It pertains to the deepest levels of our personality, entails a psychological, spiritual and biological dimension, influences a human being's every act and determines our total response to life. Though sex is a private act of intimacy that has direct consequences for our personal dignity, it also has an undeniable influence on the dignity of society as a whole. The social need for stable human relationships and sound procreational customs, as well as the threat of unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuse, sexual diseases etc are but a few examples of the social implications of sexual behaviour.

The advent of HIV/Aids is a clear reminder of this public dimension of sexual behaviour and the need to develop safe sexual mores. It relates sexual behaviour and human dignity to each other in

an unprecedented way. HIV/AIDS threatens the dignity of individuals and South African society as a whole, because it takes the lives of the economic productive sector of society, destabilises families and leads to disturbing phenomena such as children having to make a life on the streets.

South Africa is currently experiencing a crisis with regard to sexual mores. Recent statistics from Lovelife show that 42% of South African teenagers engage in sex. 51% of those had sex before the age of 15 and 20% before 12 (Natal Witness 2004:10). Prostitution and other sectors of the sex industry in South Africa have been increasing since 1994, while sexual abuse, especially rape is a major concern (cf The Star 2002:12).

Various social factors contribute to the state of sexual mores in South Africa:

- Economic hardship is a major reason for sexual promiscuity. Poverty often coincides with substance abuse, disillusionment and self destructive activities. This in turn leads to violent contexts where violence often occurs against women and children. Statistics of rape, child abuse and incest in the poor communities of South Africa are staggering (cf Lenkabula 2002:60). Economic hardship also provides a major incentive for the continual growth of the sex industry in Africa. Commercial sex is common in Africa, especially in urban centres, since illicit sex provides an easy and substantial source of income (Kamaara 2004:273).
- Urbanisation has led to an environment in which the social sanctioning of norms is eroding. Urban people become anonymous entities among the masses. While rural communities are characterised by greater uniformity, urban communities are plural in nature. The result is that urban people have daily contact with a variety of moral discourses (cf Esterhuyse 1980:8, De Bruyn 1998:8). Black people have experienced the erosion of family connections due to urbanisation especially traumatic during the Apartheid years, when black men were forced to leave their families in the designated homelands, in order to labour in the industries and mines.
- Social mobility in contemporary society makes long term relationships obsolete (Grenz 1990:102). It changes the

general orientation in society away from permanent relationships toward short and intermediate relationships. In this environment all personal relationships become short term contracts, even sexual relationships

- Since 1994 legislation on immoral sexual practices has softened a great deal. Prostitution has been decriminalised, while pornography, abortion and same sex marriages have been legalised (though an appeal is still pending in the Constitutional Court on the issue of same sex marriages). More flexible legislation makes it easier for the sex industry in South Africa to expand rapidly.
- The mass media has become the major source of sex information in modern society. It is easily accessible for all, including children, and devotes a disproportionate of time to sex, mostly for reasons of profit. Unfortunately the media's depiction of sex is often unrealistic and distorted. Sex is presented in general as a free for all act of self gratification. This sex ethic undoubtedly has an enormous effect on the sexual development of teenagers who are naturally interested in matters relating to sex. For many children the mass media has indeed become a guide to irresponsible sexual indulgence.

Though the above-mentioned factors currently influence sexual mores in a decisive way, sexual attitudes are, at its deepest level, determined by our values. The aim of this article is to compare the anthropological values that underlie modern sexual morality with the anthropology of Scripture, and to give certain guidelines for a responsible sex ethics that can safeguard human dignity.

2 BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SEXUAL MORALITY

The Biblical view on sexuality must be understood from the perspective of creation and re-creation and not the fall. It is because of the creational sexuality of humanity that the Old Testament provides a positive view of sexuality. This positive view is maintained throughout biblical history, even though the fall has perverted sexuality, as is the case in all spheres of life. Unfortunately, the Bible's positive view on sexuality was suppressed by Christianity itself since the second century. Influential theologians such as Augustine, Thomas of Aquino, Luther and Calvin viewed sex only as a means to procreate. Sexual behaviour

exercised for any other purpose, was seen as sinful (cf De Bruyn 1998:4).

2.1 Sameness, difference and communality

The Genesis narrative (1:27) relates man's image of God to man being created as male and female. The words צלם and דמות do not imply that man is created in the physical image of God, but rather that man reflect God's virtues, especially His ability to relate. God wills that man's being should be fulfilled in the relationship between *I* and *Thou*, as God Himself exists in relationship and not isolation (Barth 1961:116, 117).

The statement that the human was created as male and female portrays the structural and functional differentiation between the sexes as being present since the start of creation. This structural difference does not imply the co-existence of two sorts of human beings, but rather a polarity that is constitutive of humanity as such (Thielicke 1964:5). Humanity possesses qualities of sameness and difference that constitute our being, is inherently part of the creational order, and expresses the variedness of human existence. Structural differentiation is so constitutive of humanity that it appears as a primeval order and endures as a constant despite its devaluation in the Fall (Thielicke 1964:3). Sexual distinctions are the only structural differentiation in which humans exists. No other distinction between humans is so utterly different than between the human male and female. No other relationship is so obvious and universally valid as the one that's force resides precisely in the presupposed underlying otherness (Barth 1961:118). Sexuality must therefore be seen as an intended part of God's creation (Sapp 1977:10).

Sexuality forms the dynamic that bonds the dialectic of sameness and difference into a unity of persons (cf Grenz 1990:7). Through sexuality we give expression to our existence as embodied creatures and to our basic incompleteness as embodied persons in our relationships to each other (Grenz 1990:8). Our sexuality calls us to move toward completeness and it expresses the social and communal dimension of human existence. This fact is reiterated in Genesis 2:18 where it is stated that it's not good for man to be alone, he needs a companion. God decides to create the female who is called עוזר and נגד which means *help*, *supporter* or *complementary part*. These terms do not suggest a created order of inequality

between male and female, but express mutual dependence, support and correspondence between the sexes (cf Fouche 1988:54; Sapp 1977:13). There is no indication of any distinction in rank. Both receive the blessing as well as the command to subdue the earth (Thielicke 1964:7).

The bonding purpose of sexuality is illustrated in Genesis in the fact that it becomes the instrument through which humanity is procreated and community established. The bonding that transpires through the union of male and female does not end with the husband and wife as an isolated union. It rather becomes a first step towards the establishment of the broader human community (Grenz 1990:20; Douma 1993:119). Man is commanded by God to multiply and fill the earth. Family arises out of the sexual bonding between male and female (Gn 4:1), as well as generations that multiply (Gn 4:9), and the establishment of cities and entire societies (4:17, 21-22). Sexual behaviour can therefore never be isolated from its communal dimension, because it is the origin of social community. For Christianity the social dimension of sex will always be extremely important. According to Paul the social bonding that sexual drive initiates, eventually culminates in the community between the corporate community of believers (1 Cor 6:15).

The second creation narrative locates sexual intercourse within the context of marriage: “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gn 2:24). Though some interpreters question the assumption that this passage refers to the institution of marriage, it is clear from the broader context of Genesis 2-4 that the narrative tells us about the development of the basic institutions of human society. Marriage is presented by the authors as the primal human community that eventually expands into other forms of human community. It is thus a constituent part of the order of creation. Jesus and Paul certainly interpreted Genesis 2:24 in this way. In Matthew 19 Jesus refers to Genesis 2:24 when stating that marriage is a monogamous union of male and female in a lifelong commitment characterized by faithfulness. The union between husband and wife may not be broken, because what God has united may not be separated (v 6). In 1 Corinthians 6 and 7 Paul directly relates Genesis 2:24 to marriage and interprets the word one *flesh* as an indication that each husband should have his own wife and each wife her own husband (v 2). According to Paul the bodies of male and female in the marriage

relationship do not belong only to themselves, but to each other. Husband and wife therefore have a positive responsibility to engage in sexual intercourse in order to strengthen the marital relationship. Sexual intercourse does not only serve a procreational purpose, but it is an act of physical and spiritual bonding that protects the exclusiveness of the institution of marriage against external dangers, such as promiscuity (v 5).

2.2 Fall and sexual behaviour

In essence sexuality serves an integrational and bonding function. However, after the fall, the true meaning of sex became distorted. Man and woman disrupted their relationship with God and creation with the result that their own relationship was disordered. Sexual promiscuity is a visible sign of the distorted relationship between male and female, because at its core it expresses infidelity and unfaithfulness. However, in Genesis 3:16 the distortion of gender relations is specifically related to a relation of equality becoming a relation of hierarchy. The woman became subservient and the man dominant.

It is important to note that the male/female hierarchy in the Genesis narrative is related to the fall. The male's dominion over the female is presented as a curse and direct consequence of sin. Evidently, there is a qualitative difference between a curse and a norm. A curse describes the inevitable consequences of an act, a norm prescribes the correct form of behaviour. Rather than being a prescription for what is morally binding on all subsequent relationships, the curse of Genesis 3:16 is a description of the present reality after the fall (Grenz 1990:28; Douma 1993:23).

The distorted hierarchical nature of sex since the fall had an profound influence on the Hebraic society of the Old Testament. The patriarchal supremacy of man in Hebrew society became evident in three ways: 1) men had the freedom to have more than one wife, 2) men could dismiss their wives, while the wives did not have the same right, 3) women were seen as the property of men (cf Thielicke 1964:105; Douma 1993:66; Sapp 1977:33). The monogamous ideal of creation was violated by the tolerance of polygamy and the allowance of divorce. Polygamy was an attempt to respond to the generally lower status of women in the economic and social order and women's fragile situation within society (Grenz 1990:81-82). Its function was to put every marriageable women in a proper relation

to a man in order to avoid tragedies such as homeless children, illegitimate children and childless women being ostracized from society (cf Thieliicke 1964:107). Divorce came into existence, and was codified in Mosaic law, in order to protect the status of women in a patriarchal society where men at times simply left women to their own destiny. Though the Bible describes these practises it does not prescribe such behaviour. Grenz (1990:91) rightly states: "Laws designed to govern sexual conduct do not present the ideal, but mitigate evil".

The curse of Genesis 3:15-20 is overcome by the coming of Christ who renews all human relationships and re-establishes the creational equality between male and female (Gl 2:28, 1 Pt 3:7). The view of women as being the property of men is not shared by the New Testament community. On the contrary, women played an important role in the early Jesus movement and in the early church (Mt 28:1, Lk 24:10, Jn 11:5, 19:25). The New Testament addresses the distorted nature of polygamy and divorce by portraying the creational ideal of monogamy as reflecting the original intent of the Creator (cf Mt 5:32, 19:4-6, Lk 16:32, 1 Cor 7, 1 Th 4:3-6). Divorce is condemned in no uncertain terms. Both the Gospels and the epistles of Paul describe the separation of a monogamous union as contrary to the will of God, because the oneness of husband and wife is indissoluble (Mt 19:8-9, 1 Cor 7:12). Divorce must not be seen as an order of creation, but it is rather a regulation of necessity (Thieliicke 1964:109).

According to the gospels, Jesus dealt with women as equal human beings (cf Mt 15:21, 8:14, Lk 8:2). In John 4, for instance, Jesus addresses a Samaritan woman contrary to Jewish customs. By doing this He looks beyond the disturbed relationship of the Fall. Jesus' attitude really is a protest against the despised status of women in rabbinical Judaism and patriarchal Greek culture (cf Thieliicke 1964:8; Sapp 1977:43).

Paul shares this view in Galatians 3:28 and Ephesians 5:21. In Galatians 3:28 he states that both male and female are equal (one) in Christ, and in Ephesians 5:21 he gives both husband and wife the command to submit to each other. Yet the equality Paul speaks of does not negate structural differences, but rather relates and directs people to each other, resulting in true freedom (cf Barth 1961:164). There is thus no contradiction between Galatians 3:28 and other

Pauline passages about gender relations. When Paul speaks in other passages (1 Cor 11:2, Eph 5:22, Col 3:18, 1 Tim 2:9) of the husband as being the head of his wife in marriage, and commands wives to be obedient to their husbands, he does not thereby promote an oppressive-hierarchical view of marriage, but rather emphasises the structural and functional differences between male and female that complement each other in the marriage relationship.

In 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 Paul addresses a specific form of ill behaviour among the Corinthian women who undermined the authority of their husbands in various ways during worship services (1 Cor 11:10, 16). Paul's main concern in the Corinthian passages is that women must under all circumstances be women and that she must conduct herself as such and not as a man (cf Barth 1961:156). Both men and women have their own proper place in the marriage relationship. Their proper roles can not be determined legalistically, but only analogically. Marriage has as analogy the harmonious loving relationship between God the Father, Christ and the church (cf 1 Cor 11:3). The Father is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of the church, and the husband is head of his wife. In his exercise of authority, man cannot exploit his wife, but he must express his authority in love in the same way as Christ rules His church in love (cf Eph 5:25). At the same time, female obedience must be grounded in love in the same way as the church is obedient to Christ, and Christ to His Father (5:24) (cf Barth 1961:170, 173). However the female's obedience to her husband is always secondary to her obedience to Christ who is her primary head.

Such a harmonious relationship based on love and mutual respect inevitably leads to true freedom. God lays a duty on all, but also grants all a right. Obviously the historical manifestation of this principle will change as times change. Authority and obedience are relational terms that must be adjusted and redefined in different cultural contexts. Paul's statements can therefore not be applied literally to the very different situations of today. Yet the structural and functional differences between man and woman ought to be respected in marriage.

2.3 Man as a holistic being

Though the Bible postulates the duality of humankind, in the sense that humanity consists of sameness and difference, it does not share the soul/body dualism of Greek anthropology that distinguishes

between a higher spiritual part and a lower bodily part of human existence. When the Bible speaks of man's flesh, spirit or soul it does not depict them as separate substances but as interdependent elements that are necessary for human existence (Sapp 1977:5). The Bible rejects the partition and stratification of man, by describing man as a psychophysical unity whose bodily and spiritual dimensions cannot be separated from each other. In the creation narrative man is described as נִפְשׁ (Gen 2:7). נִפְשׁ does not only refer to the soul, but to the whole of man as an animated being who receives the principle of life from God.

The basic holistic anthropology in the Old Testament is re-affirmed in the New Testament in the doctrine of resurrection. Paul reacted against the anti-materialist Gnostic teaching that describes man's bodily existence as inherently evil and forbade people to marry and have sexual relations, by stating in 1 Corinthians 6-7 that Christ came to salvage man in the whole of his embodied existence. Not only the soul will be salvaged, but the body will also be resurrected. God's commitment to renew man's whole being becomes clear in the work of the Holy Spirit. The human body is the dwelling place or temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19).

The dualistic notion of Gnosticism not only lead to ascetic behaviour among Corinthian Christians, but also to πορνεία. Πορνεία is a generic term that refers to sexual immorality of any kind, such as adultery (Mt 5:32), fornication (cf Gl 5:19, Eph 5:3), incest (1 Th 4:3) and prostitution (1 Cor 6:18) (cf Louw & Nida 1988:771; Van Zyl 2002:243). Because of the overestimation of the importance of the spiritual and the underestimation of the importance of man's bodily existence, some Corinthian Christians believed that promiscuous sexual behaviour are morally justified. Sex is natural and has no moral implications, with the result that sexual indulgence has no effect on the spiritual wellbeing of man or any consequences for his justification (cf 1 Cor 6:13). In reaction to this dualistic notion Paul states that man is an unity of spirit and body. Sexual intercourse between male and female is not only a genital act, but is fundamentally spiritual, and therefore affects the whole human person. Through the sex act male and female become one *flesh* (σάρκα μίαν) before God. Σάρκα μίαν not only refers to a bodily unity, but also a spiritual unity before God. It denotes the union of their total being (cf Douma 1993:113, Barth 1961:134). When a person engages in a sexual relationship with a prostitute he

becomes bodily and spiritually one with that prostitute before God. Not only does he sin against his own body and soul, but also against the corporate spiritual body of Christ.

The holistic nature of human beings implies that sexuality can never be degraded to a mere biological activity. Πορνεία is in essence dehumanising and self mutilating, not only because it reduces sex to a biological exercise, but also because of its self-centred nature. If the wholeness of the sexual partner is denied, the other person's uniqueness is also lost (cf Thielicke 1964:25). In Matthew 5:27-28 Jesus addresses the core issue at stake in the sin of lust. What really matters is one's inner motivation, whether it is actualised in an external act or not. In lust, as in adultery, the created purpose of sex, namely to unite male and female in an intimate relationship, cannot be fulfilled. The goal of lust remains the objectification of another person for selfsatisfaction without a regard for the needs of the other person (Sapp 1977:46).

Stressing the holistic nature of humans is important. Not only does it help to curb the sexual desire, but it liberates sex and brings it to fullness. Sex is fundamentally connected to anthropological motif, personhood and human spirituality.

2.4 The meaning of the sex act

Sex is in its nature an affirmation of the psychophysical unity of man. If sex was mere *bios*, it would mean that partners could be used interchangeable at random. The whole structure of the sex act, which points to a two way communication, contradicts a mere biological view of the sexual act. The human libido cannot only desire when it desires itself, it must take the other person into account in order to experience self-gratification (Thielicke 1964:48-50). It is therefore never subjected to the law of automatism as found in the animal kingdom.

Sex certainly contains an element of self-expression, self-actualization and self-love, but it only finds its true meaning as an act of communication. The communicative meaning and ethical implications of the sex act depend on the context in which it occurs and on the intent of the persons involved (cf Grenz 1990:65). In the Old Testament, sexual intercourse is described as ׁוּדַע which means to know. Though ׁוּדַע is used as a euphemism, it is significant that a psychological and not a physical symbol is used to describe sexual intercourse (Thielicke 1964:66). Obviously the act of sexual union is

seen as a mode of *knowing* the other partner (Thielicke 1964:67). However, it is a special form of knowing that is different from all other forms of knowing in the sense that the mysteries of the other person are revealed. It is the most complete, most accurate and most fulfilling knowledge of one another available to humans (cf Sapp 1977:21). In order to protect this innate mystery of the human being, the New Testament emphasises modesty and soberness in clothing (1 Tm 2:9).

Because of its intimate and mysterious character, sex can never be an experiment, neither can it be a means to start an relationship, but it serves the completion of an relationship. The revelational function of sex implies that the exclusive lifelong marriage relationship is the only proper context for physical sex, precisely because sex involves the knowing of the intimate mysteries of the other person. In Ephesians 5:32 Paul speaks of marriage as a mystery (μυστήριον). Though he refers to the archetypal meaning of marriage for the relationship between Christ and the church, he thereby also states the mysterious uniqueness of the marriage relationship. The question is: What is the essential purpose of the sex act within marriage?

Biblical theology is united in describing the physical act of sex as a visible expression of the exclusivity of the marriage bond that unites husband and wife (cf Gn 2:24, Pr 5:15, Mt 19, 1 Cor 7, Lv 18). The sex act is an affirmation of the unseparable bond between husband and wife, a re-enactment of the wedding vows, a commitment to the transparency and personal openness needed for a healthy relationship, and an act of total acceptance that expresses the desire not only to receive but also to give love. Sexuality encourages our longing for connectedness with others as it compels us to go beyond a self-centred existence to a relationship with another in celebration of life (cf Lenkabula 2002:55-68, Barth 1961:131). This self-giving nature of the sex act is strengthened by the procreative potential of sexual love which is a form of expansive love.

Thielicke (1964:27) rightly observes that sexual expression will only reach its true meaning if ἠρως is complemented with ἀγάπη. Though the word ἐρως is used only twice in the Septuagint, namely Proverbs, the reality of ἐρως is certainly considered in the Bible. The word ἀγάπη, in contrast, is regularly found in the Bible (cf Black 2003:11).

The term *αγάπη* denotes a form of self-giving love. It is used in the New Testament in the context of showing regard, concern or affection for a specific person (Louw & Nida 1989:292). *ερωσ* is that dimension of love that is born out of desire. It is the yearning for fulfilment and deep connection (Black 2003:118). *ερωσ* stresses the worth of the other person *for me*. It is an important element of sexual relationships, because it sets certain conditions before a relationship can become sexual. For instance, before a sexual relationship can exist, there must be physical attraction, a certain correspondence in age, and a special personal relationship. Though important, *ερωσ* contains a dangerous dark side in the sense that one's dependence on the other person can recede with time, leaving the other person vulnerable and lost. At this point *αγάπη* becomes important because it accepts the other person as an authentic being before God that should be cared for, simply because of who he or she is (cf Thielicke 1964:27). *ερωσ* exercised apart from *αγάπη* is indeed a form of self-assertion that contradicts Christian love. The love of God Himself is characterised by the fact that He connects with man after the fall, though man has no more worth (*ερωσ*) for God (1 Jn 4:9, 10). The book Song of Songs serves as a clear biblical reminder that *ερωσ* should be taken up in *αγάπη* (Loader 2002:75). Though this book praises the beauty of erotic love, it also warns against the power of erotic love. Its power is as strong as death itself (8:6), and should therefore be respected. Erotic love must be exercised in responsibility. It consists out of give and take (cf Douma 1993:65).

Whenever *ερωσ* and *αγάπη* merges, the highest form of love emerges. It manifests itself in mutual submission where the happiness of the other person is sought in the whole breadth of common existence. The concept of mutual submission is put forth most explicitly in Ephesians 5:21-33. Verse 21 states the general principle that should guide all Christian relationships: "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ". Hereby Paul states that Christ's love for his church should be the model for all of a Christian's human relationships and His love is characterised by submitting Himself to the needs of others (cf Phlp 2:5-11). In 1 Corinthians 7:3-4 Paul applies the principle of mutual submissiveness to the sexual domain. Both partners have a duty to submit their bodies to each other in sexual intercourse, because their bodies belong to each other. Sex is the ultimate act of mutual

submissiveness. The first desire in the sexual act should therefore always be to please the other (cf Grenz 1990:73).

Pre-marital sex is unacceptable because it cannot express the true meaning of the sexual act. It affirms a bond that does not yet exist, and introduces non-exclusiveness to an exclusive act. It is difficult to see how the true meaning of sex that is characterised by exclusiveness, faithfulness, commitment and permanence can be practiced outside of marriage. Grenz (1990:193) rightly states: “Sex outside of marriage is a contradiction to reality, in that it entails involvement in a life uniting act apart from a life uniting intent”.

In modern societies sexual expression is often seen as an inherent right that every human possesses in order to actualize himself as a human person. Pre-marital sex is therefore seen as justifiable. Though the Bible has a very positive view of sex, it does not view sexual expression as a prerequisite for being truly human. The importance of sex must not be overemphasised. Sex is about the expression of love between man and wife, not the mere fulfilment of bodily desires. Barth (1961:131) rightly states that sex should have no independent life, and should not determine, decide and control human life, but have its essence solely and exclusively in the freedom of man, of male and female and their encounter and co-existence.

In I Corinthians 7 Paul applauds the life style of celibacy as enabling a person to serve God to the fullest extent without any external hindrance. The single or celibate life is not an inferior style of living, but could in certain circumstances be an ideal way of life. At the same time he warns that not all people have received the gift to live a celibate life.

3 SEX AND SECULAR CONCEPTS OF MAN

3.1 African gender perspectives

Today sexual promiscuity is perhaps the most life threatening moral evil in Africa, because of its high connection to the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. According to estimates of UNAIDS, approximately two thirds of all the global cases of HIV/AIDS are found in Africa (Kamaara 2004:263-288). In South Africa the interaction between Western and African culture and the exposure of Africans to the process of modernization has led to the rapid spread of HIV/Aids. Yet, though several factors lead to the transmission of

AIDS, it can't be denied that sexual promiscuity is by far the main reason for the spread of this illness.

Gender relations in Africa are contributing a great deal to sexual promiscuous behaviour. In many instances gender relations are characterized by male domination and female subordination, especially in sexual encounters (Kamaara 2004:9). This patriarchal view of sexual relations is clearly illustrated in African initiation rites. The initiation rites of men (circumcision) symbolise the man's control over the female sex, while the initiation rites of women (clitoridectomy) symbolise the removal of sexual aggression and submission to men (Kamaara 2004:9).

In traditional African culture the underlying theme of lineage, with its emphasis on reproduction and descent, runs through the social systems. In many African societies, such as the Masai in Kenya, men are expected to display uncontrolled sexual desires and to be sexually experienced (Kamaara 2004:10). In sub-Saharan societies the desire for descendants is dominant and practices of polygyny are common (Caldwell 1989:187). Families negotiate for the union of the couple, then gradually permit them sexual relations, at least in part to test the woman's fertility. In this way the husband's right over his wife is established. Sex becomes an expression of production relations, with the result that women are forced into unwanted sexual encounters (cf Cahill 2003:104). In most sub-Saharan African societies sexual relations are not seen as central to morality and religion, with the result that sex becomes a normal activity like work or eating (Caldwell 1989:203).

In order to address sexual immorality in the African lifestyle the cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity and the inherent inequality of women must be addressed. Such changes in traditional attitudes do not mean that all traditional leadership and morals must be rejected out of hand. In fact, it would be a grave mistake, because one of the factors that leads to moral decay in South Africa is the collapse of traditional authorities which create a leadership vacuum (The Star 2002:13). It is not a question of denying or rejecting traditional African culture, but reforming it.

3.2 Secularisation and the *radical freedom concept*

Secularisation entails a movement away from religion as a basis for understanding life, resulting in the severance of the relationship between man and religion. Religion is relegated to the fringes of life

and is seen as having little bearing on life beyond the realm of personal existence (Grenz 1990:xviii). The result is that sexuality is divorced from its theological context, separated from the public domain, and made exclusively private (cf Grenz 1990:xix; De Bruyn 1998:6).

The distinction between the public and private domains of life arose with the establishment of liberal democracies. Hauerwas (2001:484) rightly remarks that the claim that sex is a matter of private morality is a political claim dependent upon a liberal political ethos. Fixed sets of rules, natural law and religious values are no longer seen as criteria that are generally accepted enough to distinguish between right and wrong in the public domain. Rather, the degree of the *harmfulness* of an action for society is the decisive criterion. In South African constitutional jurisprudence the view is held that an individual's freedom can only be restricted when he exercise his freedom in a way that harms society (*Curtis v Minister of Safety and Security and others*, par 47). Adult pornography, for instance, is legalised in South Africa, as is the case in most modern societies, because man has the right to make private decisions free of the moral sanctions of others (*Curtis v Minister of Safety and Security and others*, par 27, 37, 47).

The radical freedom concept of secular culture is related to the view of man as an essentially free and autonomous being that has the right to determine his own identity, realise the self, and to be free of the constraints of others. This concept of man as an autonomous being was one of the main motivations behind the sexual revolution in the 1970's and the rise of the women Liberationist movement who agitated for the right of women to express their sexuality freely. Such a radical concept of freedom, however, tends to deform into a negative "freedom of" concept that overemphasizes the rights of man at the expense of social responsibilities. It is fiction to believe that private immorality will not lead to public moral decay. The private realm and the public realm simply cannot be separated in an artificial way, because man is both a private and social being. Our sexual ethic is part and parcel of our social ethic. Adult pornography is legal in South Africa, because it is seen as an unharmed act practiced at the private level. Yet recent statistics suggest that in 98% of sexual offence cases pornography was in some way or another involved (Meissner 2004:10).

The HIV-pandemic is a clear reminder that sex has undeniable public and social implications that cannot be denied. Personal sexual practices affect the general well-being of society, not only with regard to social health, but also with respect to social stability. Society therefore has a duty to protect basic sex mores and social institutions, such as marriage and family. To do this a new concept of true freedom is needed.

This is where the Christian concept of freedom can be of some value. The Christian concept of freedom, in contrast with the liberal concept of freedom, is inherently positive. The Christian faith closely relates individual rights to moral responsibility. Freedom is not to be *free of others*, but to be *free for others* (cf Gl 5:13). Sexuality can not be seen as a private matter, isolated from its public dimension, but must be practiced with regard to the right of others.

3.2 Utilitarian ethics as foundational norm of modern sexuality

Modern sexual attitudes and practices are closely related to a consumerist culture that is both the cause and the product of market capitalism and economic globalization (Caldwell 2003:96). In economic consumerism man becomes an impersonal bearer of a labour force, and when his ability to work is gone, he is not seen as a functional being any longer (cf Thielicke 1964:23). On the sexual terrain consumerism manifests itself in the “performance attitude”. As soon as a person loses his or her sexual attractiveness and capabilities he or she is not worthy of sexual love anymore.

One of the general characteristics of this consumerist culture is that it practices a distorted form of utilitarian ethics that measures everything according to its utility. According to utilitarianism, ethics is determined by man’s subjective feeling (Mill 1901:80). Happiness is the criterion for right and wrong. Actions are right in proportion to how much they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. The rightness or wrongness of an action are determined not by reliance on rules or virtues that are grounded in authority of metaphysics, but by whether it results in pleasure or pain (cf Mill 1901:93). Admittedly utilitarianism cannot be equated with egoism. According to John Mill, one of the main proponents of utilitarianism, we can never speak of our happiness apart from the happiness of the whole. Individual happiness is not opposed to the happiness of society. Some forms of happiness are more important than others. The form of happiness most people

strive for is the most desirable form of happiness (cf Wilkens & Padgett 2000:204-205). In practise however, utilitarianism tend to lead to egoism, because the point of departure still is the utility of other objects for the autonomous individual who has a right to self-actualization.

The question is: Can happiness and pleasure really be a criterion for right or wrong? Are all forms of pleasure necessarily good and all forms of pain necessarily bad? Is the value of a person dependent on his or her utility value?

Utilitarian culture, with its emphasis on happiness and pleasure, tends to separate the act of sex from the essence of being human. It views sex largely as a consumer article that gives pleasure, not as a constitutive part of our being. Sex is thereby reduced to a form of recreation and ερωσ is emphasized at the expense of αγαπη.

Herein lays the danger of an utilitarian approach to sex. Recreational sex is always in danger of treating people as merely convenient objects for pleasure. It denies the communicative nature of sex and instrumentalises sex for egoistic pleasure. The instrumentalist use of another person's body is a blatant denial of his or her human dignity, because man and woman is more than the sum of its physical attributes. One cannot engage in sexual activity for pleasure and bodily gratification alone, because the body "alone" does not exist (Sapp 1977:126). God asks man to be truly man in his sexual relationships, that is to be a body, but not only a body (Barth 1961:132).

Recreational sex is not an expression of commitment, transparency, faithfulness and unconditional acceptance, but is basically self-driven and based on a performance mentality. It prevents true sexual freedom because the element of total openness and acceptance is not present in recreational sexual relationships. There is always the need to perform and the struggle of constant comparisons.

As soon as sex is recreationalised, it is inevitable that it will be commercialised. Pornography is an extreme example of the degrading commercial nature of recreational sex. In order for sex to maintain its commercial value, depictions of sex and nudity become more and more daring, explicit and degrading.

True celebration of the bond between male and female can only occur within a permanent relationship of love. The reciprocal yes of a sexual relationship is not a single event that takes place at some moment, but it is meant to continue throughout a couple's life (cf Cahill 2003:92).

3.3 The denial of sexual difference

One of the major characteristics of modern secular culture is that alternative forms of sexual associations, such as homosexual and bisexual behaviour, are accepted as valid means of sexual expression. For instance, countries such as Spain, the United States and South Africa are currently debating the legalization of same sex marriages. The acceptance of alternative sexual behaviour is related to the rise of postmodernism that questions the existence of fixed realities, hard facts, the existence of natural law etc. According to postmodernism marriage and sexual orientation are mere social constructions. It is what man decides it should be. This approach is problematic from a biblical point of view, because it denies the structural, biological and psychological function of sex. Sex is meant to bond the male and female duality into a unity. It completes human nature and serves communality by providing the means to pro-create. Same sex relationships cannot address same sex deficiencies, nor can it unify the totality of man's being. The solution is not to legitimise or normalise such behaviour, but to address the causes that result in it.

4 THE IMPORTANCE OF VALUES IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST AIDS.

The challenge for Christians is to re-invent marriage as a vocation under the stress and strain of contemporary life. The degeneration of marriage as a social institution co-insides with the deformation of family life, which in turn lead to anti-social behaviour.

In an empirical study done in the USA by Wade and Schmitt (2003:455-466) it was found that religious values affect the sexual behaviour of people in a decisive way. People with strong intrinsic religious values have less desire for open sexual relationships and show more sexual restraint. This illustrates that values are at the core of sexual behaviour. The AIDS pandemic in South Africa cannot be adequately addressed if the values that underlie our sexual behaviour are not scrutinised. The South African government's pragmatic safe sex campaign to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS is ambiguous to say the least. The problem with a pragmatic approach is that in spite of

its claims to be a-moral or non-moralistic, it in fact presupposes an ethical recommendation (cf Hauerwas 2001:485). Safe sex campaigns create among South African teenagers the impression that sex is acceptable as long as you use a condom. If the South African government's pragmatic line of thought is followed we can ask whether government should not also accept the reality of drug addiction and support a call for the provision of clean needles (cf Vorster 2004:40).

Aids clearly cannot be fought from such a neutral moral point of view. Government and civil society need to take a moral stance regarding sexual mores, because sex can no longer be seen as a moral issue belonging to the private realm of personal choice. It is a matter of life and death. The only way to fight HIV/AIDS and preserve human dignity in the long run, is to proclaim the exclusiveness of the sex act, the importance of faithfulness and the sanctity of marriage.

5 CONCLUSION

A responsible sex ethics that can safeguard human dignity ought to contain the following elements:

- The structural purpose of sexuality must be respected. Sex forms the dynamic that bonds male and female who are the same but also different.
- The holistic nature of humans must be maintained. Sex can never be reduced to a mere physical act. It affects both the spiritual and physical aspects of human nature.
- True sexual love manifests itself in mutual submission where the happiness of the other person is sought in the whole breadth of common existence (*ερωσ* and *αγαπη*). Recreational sex treat human beings as mere objects of pleasure.
- Sex must be practiced within the confines of marriage. Pre-marital sex affirms a bond that does not yet exist and introduces non-exclusiveness to an exclusive act.
- Marriage must be re-invented as a vocation. The degeneration of marriage as a social institution co-incides with the deformation of family life, which in turn lead to anti-social behaviour.

- Freedom must be exercised with restraint and respect towards the rights of others. True freedom is not freedom of, but freedom for.
- Sexual ethics must not be separated from social ethics, because man is both a private and social being.

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