



issue 40

march 2006

a forum for people grappling with faith and church issues

**values being real
supports faith stage transition
respects and validates the journeys of others
allows questions and doubts
lets God defend God**

Sexuality

I've been thinking about sexuality recently, mainly because I noticed that spirited exchanges was going to do a newsletter on it. It's been interesting.

What is sexuality? That's a question and a half. Jo Ind bravely explores it in her book (see review) which I really enjoyed. Here are some musings, and some "sound-bites" which I have found helpful, provocative, exciting, challenging and interesting!

Throughout history mystics have used the metaphor of sexual union to relate their experiences of the divine – so there is something about this intimacy that speaks of an encounter of our souls with God.

"To conceptualise God as the energy that pulsates through the whole cosmos, included me, stirred me... I saw God as the being who is before all things, the spirit which infuses all things, the love which longs for all things and which never lets go."

Jo Ind¹

"Intimacy is the touching of one soul by another. Whenever this happens there is a sexual charge to the encounter." Mike Riddell².

Is this charge, this stirring – the essence of our sexuality? When we meet another intimately, we are encountering the sacred, accessing our sexuality, touching the divine. Our encounter can be physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual, all of these, more than these.

Sexuality is holistic, connecting all of our being, body, soul, mind, spirit, heart.

It's hardly surprising then that the world, the church and a lot of us are in a mess with the subject of sex and sexuality. It touches our rawness and vulnerability, and drives at the core of who we are – most of us would rather avoid such "issues", we are masters of avoidance. Thus the world reduces it to a mere appetite – encouraging its use as just another commodity to be had whenever we want, but within this context it also gives it a place of over importance in that it pervades everything we are about – from the ice-cream we buy to the tyres we use. I'd like to reclaim sexuality; it should permeate our lives, and enrich them - in a holistic way.

I like this quote from Ian Lawton³

"I'm now of the view that one of the primary functions of the church is to accept people in their various journeys through sexuality. I have come to the view that sexuality is such an important part of our human experience that to deny someone their sexuality is to deny them spirit....The church has generally encouraged people to embrace a pious, otherworldly self that has no passion, no bodily sensation and no desire. To deny all of the good stuff of flesh is to miss out on a full experience of spirit.....We are sexual beings. We are gendered beings. We are people of diverse personality and intelligence and talent. All of this diversity is to be celebrated"

He also talks of the lessons we can learn from gays and lesbians in that through their journeys they often gain a special insight into fully embracing sexuality, and their truest self. Of course this isn't the exclusive experience of

homosexuals but it makes the point that it's our life experience and our engagement with it that heightens our knowledge, understanding, acceptance, and love of ourselves. This speaks to me of integrity, of being real, of how I might live my life in relation to myself and others and reminds me that Jesus said to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. Jo Ind talks quite a lot about this commandment.

"I believe this is a commandment never to make anything, no matter how good, more important than God.... to never locate it in the centre of our lives where it doesn't quite belong. It is very tempting to make an idol out of sex, especially as sex can, at its best, bring us the nearest many of us get to heaven in this lifetime. And I think that is precisely what we, as society do... I think if we burden our sexualities with such an intolerable weight of expectation then sooner or later we are going to come unstuck"

"To love God is to know that God is both utterly in our sexualities and utterly other than them too. It is to embrace our sexualities, to say "yes" to them, to dare to plunge in and discover God through them. It is to also love the God of silence, the God of breath."

"I believe it also includes loving our neighbour as we love ourselves and it means more than that as well. It means relishing our capacity to turn on and to be turned on, but at the same time not identifying with that part of ourselves to such an extent that when we lose it we wonder who we are or where God has gone."

Sexuality is not limited to one part of the body, it permeates the whole of our being; it is as physical as hunger, mental as arithmetic, unconscious as dreams and as revealing of our history as a museum. It is the way we reach out to others, socialising with and perhaps growing in intimacy with them. It speaks of the deep seated need in each of us for unity with one another. Through bodily presence we are acceptable to others in ways that are welcoming, tender and warm. This relatedness with them is based in our sexuality and can only be freely expressed when we are "at home" with ourselves. We don't become non-sexual beings if we are not in a sexual relationship and/or our libidos go to sleep.

What would a real and holistic approach to sexuality look like? I'm not sure, but I suspect it would include:

- sex in a loving, kind, consent giving, committed context
- embracing the intimacy our sexualities bring to all our friendships, and connections with people and the world around us
- delighting in ourselves and the way our sexualities give us a hint of the divine

& so much more

Here's to the journey.

¹ Jo Ind Memories of Bliss

² Mike Riddell Sacred Journey

³ Ian Lawson Sermon: Sins of Scripture – the Bible and Sexuality
www.christ-community.net

THANKS to everyone who has responded to our request for donations. If you would prefer to make a donation via bank transfer our account number is:03-0502-0169965-00 PLEASE reference to spirited exchanges



Aspects of sexuality - an integration of...



Primary Sexuality - our embodiment

Our:

- maleness & femaleness
- physique
- attitude towards masculinity/femininity
- response to stereotypes about men and women
- comfort/discomfort with the other sex
- degree of "at-homeness" in our bodies
- ability to function both psychologically and socially as men and women

Affective sexuality - the emotional and spiritual

Our:

- ability to "feel all our feelings" including intensely erotic, angry and lonely feelings
- ability to nurture relationships where there is warmth, belonging, intimacy, appreciation, emotional disclosure, recognition of competency
- ability to nurture our inner life - to play, pray, imagine, dream, create.

Genital Sexuality - our orgasmic capacity

Our awareness of our genital stirrings, fantasies and urges and our ability to let them find their true centre - that place that authentically reflects who we are, our values, commitments and way of life.



"Our sexuality consists of all those feelings, moods, and emotions that require a certain quality and quantity of human closeness, intimacy, tactility and love if we are to become, if we are to help each other to become, the fully evolved people that God intends us to be."
Diarmuid O'Murchu

Our emotional and sexual needs have many faces – not all of them attractive.

The Living Flame Of Love

The Living Flame Of Love
Songs of the soul in the intimate communication of loving union with God.

1. O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center! Since
now you are not oppressive,
now consummate! if it be your will:
tear through the veil of this sweet
encounter!

2. O sweet cautery,
O delightful wound!
O gentle hand! O delicate touch
that tastes of eternal life
and pays every debt!
In killing you changed death to life.

3. O lamps of fire!
in whose splendors
the deep caverns of feeling,
once obscure and blind,
now give forth, so rarely, so exquisitely,
both warmth and light to their Beloved.

4. How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart,
where in secret you dwell alone;
and in your sweet breathing,
filled with good and glory,
how tenderly you swell my heart with love.

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Sexuality.... "the embodied energy that brings flair, passion, intensity and elegance into all of our living..."
Diarmuid O'Murchu.

Sexuality can point us to God or can lead us to an inner hell. It can be an all-compassing force or it can disappear. It is both enduring and ephemeral, earthy and mystical, universal and peculiarly our own. Jo Ind

Sex – an energy you can never really figure out

"The story of all life has been a story of attraction – a coming together of atoms and of molecules, that something new might evolve. The story of human life is no different. Each is brought into being through a sexual act of union. Each is loved into life by a passionate God who places within us a yearning for union, for oneness, which will be at the heart of healthy human sexuality for life. When St Irenaeus, in the second century, declared that the glory of God is humankind fully alive, he was calling on early Christians to understand that their humanness in its entirety was what God looked for in them, not some form of divine being." Mary d'Apice, Noon to Nightfall.

Open dialogue – a space for reader response

this is an opportunity for open conversation from readers about previous articles. You may offer your own story; a broadening or different view of the subject; or point to other resources. We ask you to respect the same guidelines that are followed in Spirited Exchanges groups:

- We're not trying to produce one answer. There is freedom for differing views and opinions.
- Anyone is free to share his/her own view even if it's different or 'heretical' from some people's perspective.
- We ask for respect for each person's opinions
- We let God defend God

We'd love it if anyone wanted to share stories, journeys, an idea, questions that have struck you recently – they don't have to be tied to a particular theme! Also, any topics you'd be interested in reading comments on?

In response to the last newsletter:

I don't write "sermons" anymore but stories or reflections, it's encouraging to think that other people are on this path too in one way or another, (I had been waiting for a stray bishop to walk in and denounce me for not doing a "proper" talk!). Anon.

spirited exchanges groups for 2006

Wellington:

There will be three groups

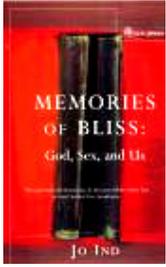
- Student spirited exchanges group meets fortnightly on Thursday evening (during term time) around a meal beginning at 630pm at 10 Glasgow St, Kelburn. For further details please contact Peter McKenzie-Bridle peter@spiritedexchanges.org.nz.
- Young adult (roughly early 20s through mid-thirties) meets fortnightly on Monday evenings at 730pm!. Next meeting 13th March at 183 Brooklyn Rd, Brooklyn. For further details please contact Donia Macartney donia@central.org.nz
- Spirited exchanges (all ages) meets fortnightly beginning Monday 27th March at Wellington Central Baptist Church at 7pm. The topic being explored on the 27th will be "the place of authority." For further details please contact Craig Braun cjbraun@extra.co.nz or Sarah Hill sarah_hill007@hotmail.com

Auckland:

- Will be on the first Friday of each month (though for March it is on Friday the 10th!). Meeting at 14 Erson Ave (Disability Resource Centre rooms) at 730pm. For further details please contact Jocelyn Grantham JG@dilworth.school.nz

Christchurch:

- A new group is looking to start up in Christchurch in the next few months. For further details please contact Elizabeth Taylor candet@paradise.net.nz



Sexy theology

Jo Ind | *Memories of bliss: God, sex, and us.* London: SCM Press 2003 ISBN: 0-334-02885-X

Jo Ind's latest book explores the intimate relationship between God, sex and us in an attempt to make 'a real difference to the ways in which we love, touch, relate and pray'. It cannot have been an easy book to write and at times it makes for rather difficult reading. Ind recognises from the outset the challenge she faces in addressing such an intimate subject, highlighting even the difficulty of finding language to talk about sex that is not overly clinical, euphemistic or crude. While this difficulty may, as she claims, be due mainly to a collective discomfort with the subject matter, the frequent switches between phrases like 'heterosexual vaginal intercourse' and other, rather less formal terms suggests a lack of clarity about the book's intended readers. Perhaps such juxtaposition is good postmodern stuff, like tying rope around Rodin¹, or 'rectifying' Goya², but here it grates, drawing unwanted attention to itself and breaking the flow and coherence of the narrative, the literary equivalent of getting a lover's name wrong in the throes of passion.

Having said that, the book repays careful reading for it contains many helpful reflections on, and thoughtful insights into, the connection between sexuality and spirituality by asking first, 'what is sexuality?', and then, 'what are we to do with it?'

Ind defines sexuality as our capacity to be aroused and the means by which it happens. This 'spacious' definition is not how we are used to thinking about sexuality, and most readers will need to remind themselves regularly of what Ind means when she uses the term. Its major advantage over what might be called 'traditional' definitions lies in its ability to move us beyond a

narrow pigeonholing of people as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. By considering how our sexuality – or sexualities to be more accurate – is affected and shaped by our bodies and minds, our childhoods and our unconscious, and even the society of which we are a part, we are presented with a more fluid, more dynamic, and more contextual understanding of ourselves than can be found in those more traditional labels. Thus we are given a means of understanding why different people are aroused by different things, and why the same person may be turned on by different things at different times or in different places.

In teasing out how we are to live our sexualities well, Ind argues that we must take seriously Jesus' teaching that we are to love God, love our neighbour and love ourselves. This is by no means a new approach to sexual ethics, but Ind unpacks the implications of obeying these commandments in accessible and invigorating ways. The chapter on 'loving yourself' is quite superb, exploring the paradox that loving ourselves means taking responsibility for our sexuality while acknowledging that we are not responsible for its development during our childhood and adolescence. Drawing on the image of the risen Christ, Ind argues that 'when we learn to love ourselves, sexualities and all [...w]e don't lose the marks of our wounds but they do not stop us dazzling'.

We are presented not with easy answers, but with a way of living and loving that is both intensely liberating and fundamentally infused with the joy and power of the resurrection. This is good news for a church that is often seen as judgmental and life-denying when it comes to sexual matters.

As a Christian analysis of 'God, sex and us', there will be those who complain that Ind has relegated God to the back seat. But I rather like the idea of God in the back seat, the source of our desire, and the real object of our furtive fumbling.

Graeme Rainey

This review first appeared in the University of Reading, UK, Chaplaincy newsletter, Summer Term 2003.

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/art/2800109.stm>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/news/story/0,11711,925957,00.htm>

If you would like to contribute an article, suggest a topic for discussion, comment about the newsletter or come off the mailing list please write to the Editor: **Jenny McIntosh** at P.O. Box 11551, Wellington or email: spiritex@central.org.nz or jenny@central.org.nz or Donia Macartney donia@central.org.nz. For Alan Jamieson: alan@central.org.nz or aj@paradise.net.nz Website: www.spiritedexchanges.org.nz