

Consideration of a Spiritual Role in Sex and Sex Therapy

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In spite of high levels of reported spirituality in the United States, spiritual issues are only beginning to be recognized as a therapeutic tool in sex therapy. This article provides background material for theological and clinical questions as they relate to individualized concepts of sex and sexual dysfunction. The complexity of human sexuality is compounded by the intricacy of human spirituality, yet they share common ground. An argument and corresponding guidelines are proposed for further exploration into incorporating spiritual belief systems into sex therapy.

Keywords: sex therapy; spirituality; religious issues; tantra

Rarely have two topics elicited as much interest and controversy as spirituality and sexuality, yet these diverse but interrelated issues remain at the forefront of human consciousness. Though separate issues, many have been intrigued by the apparent relationship between them. Traditionally, sex therapy has focused on the biosychosocial aspects of human conduct, but in a quest for a more holistic approach to treatment, some are now beginning to consider the possible meaning of spirituality in sexual behavior. Certainly, the prevalence of spiritual adherents deserves such an exploration.

Results of the American Religious Identification Survey (City University of New York, the Graduate Center, 2001) indicate that 81% of the U.S. population identifies with some religious group. Of that number, 76.5% identify as Christians. Although these data do not identify those who subscribe to a nonreligious spiritual orientation, the data do indicate that a substantial portion of Americans are generally influenced by religious principles and more specifically, by Christian attitudes and mores concerning ideas of matter (including the

human body), soul, and spirit. Although conservative, Western Christian convention has prescribed a distinct separation between matter and spirit that has had tremendous implications for attitudes regarding human sexuality, there has never been uniformity of thought on such issues (Beck, 2003; Jones & Hostler, 2002). For example, exactly what constitutes “spirituality” and “soul” is not consistent in the literature and certainly open to interpretation. In addition, much debate has occurred over the role of the body as related to these concepts (Black, 2003; Gotz, 2001). In question is whether the body (or any matter) can be a medium for spiritual fulfillment. That is, is the body theologically inferior to spiritual matters or can it be a means to enhance spirituality? Because this is the subject of interpretation, uncertainty arises about the relative virtue of sex under different human conditions.

Recognizing that definitions of spirituality can be highly personal, it is nonetheless important to create a point of reference for the purpose of this article. Therefore, spirituality can be seen as “a core dimension of humanity that seeks to discover meaning, purpose, and connectedness with self, others, and ultimately God” (MacKnee, 2002, p. 234). In this sense, spirituality differs from religion, which is a more organized treatment of some forms of spirituality (Bullis, 1998). Where spirituality and sexuality converge is in their mutual striving toward wholeness by connecting with another. Despite the personalized nature of spiritual beliefs, it is on this broader, common ground that incorporating a spiritual dimension to human sexuality can be considered.

SEX AND SPIRITUALITY

Christian Viewpoints

Clients bring a vast array of spiritual orientations to clinicians, but the preponderance of Christianity in Western culture warrants particular consideration in matters of sexuality. Debates about the function of sexuality have occurred for centuries and are a reflection of the elucidation and evolution

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of thought over time by sundry people. As some of the earliest and most prominent Christian thinkers pondered the meaning of key theological ideas, they often relied on and interpreted the writings of Greek philosophers who were, in turn, likely influenced by previous logicians and mystics. Plato, for example, saw the soul as superior to but caged by the body during material life (Beck, 2003; Jones & Hostler, 2002). Plato did not trust our senses, which he felt could deceive us into wanting what may not be good for us. Therefore, desire can be good only when what is sought transcends the material world (i.e., is spiritual in nature) (Jowett, 1942). Furthermore, Plato argued that unlike the body, the soul is eternal (Beck, 2003). Such ideas influenced St. Augustine. He later purported that body, spirit, and soul are quite separate entities and relegated to the body the least status and importance because of its ability to encompass evil (Beck, 2003).

Plato's student, Aristotle, devised a different view of the body and soul. Rather than being discrete, flesh and soul are united and the soul dies with the body, thereby constituting the essential life-form (Loomis, 1943). St. Thomas Aquinas mirrored this thought, although with the divergent notion of the soul surviving the body (Beck, 2003). The unity of body and soul effectively removes any real hierarchy between them and enables the material (body) to be a sacrament (a sign of God's grace) in a religious context (Gotz, 2001, p. 3).

These ideas have great implications for human sexual conduct in Christians, who have to consider their stance on the material/spiritual relationship from the perspective of biblical original sin, or the Fall (Jones & Hostler, 2002). Although the Bible generally advocates sex within marriage, whether sexual behavior can be raised to a spiritual level is open to interpretation and individual moral structures. It is presumed that many Christians must either consciously or unconsciously ask themselves whether the body is inherently corrupt or can be regarded as a vehicle for spiritual experience within specific parameters, such as marriage. For the former, the focus is on the sexual act (intercourse). For the latter, the relationship between two people exemplifying God's love is paramount and as such, has spiritual overtones (Stayton, 2002).

Eastern Approaches

Perhaps contrary to some impressions, many Eastern religions have also imposed constraints on sexual behavior. Like Christians, traditional Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist adherents encounter a duality between sexuality and spirituality (Wade, 1998; White, 1998). However, a tantric tradition arose among some Hindus, Buddhists, and Taoists in the East wherein human sexuality and spirituality are intertwined and interdependent (MacKnee, 2002; Urban, 2000). Tantra refers to a philosophy pertaining to the "liberation or expansion of consciousness" that employs a holistic integration of mind, body, and spirit that can be attained through bodily activity such as eating, breathing, and sexual behavior and is founded on the belief that everything in nature is divine (Bullis, 1998, p.

102). It is thought that the body is one possible medium for spiritual fulfillment that can produce a sense of transcendence that is beyond the physical being (Wade, 1998). The idea of bodily shame, common in Christian tradition, is antithetical to this ideology (Romero & Albareda, 2001).

Bullis (1998) described three levels of tantric sexual behavior. The first level is sex as a selfish endeavor in which the partners seek personal satisfaction. The second level is passionate and based on mutual desire. At the third level the partners not only revel in each other but also regard each other as sacred. It is at this last point that sex becomes transformative, producing the highest level of consciousness, love, and unity with the divine. The couple experiences a complete loss of ego and duality, entering a state of bliss where "spirit was joined to matter to produce enlightenment" (Gotz, 2001, p. 5). This condition is not attained accidentally and is produced by deliberate plan wherein the state of mind and intentions of the partners determine how their sexual encounter will transpire.

One tantric missive is the *KamaSutra* (Danielou, 1994), written by Vatsyayana in about third century India and first translated into English in the late 1800s. To the casual observer, the *KamaSutra* may appear to be merely an ancient sex manual (Puri, 2002). However, translators and scholars regard it more as a lesson in the art of living, including love (Doniger, 2003). Founded in a tantric spiritualism, the *KamaSutra* does not promote sex for the sake of pleasure but rather describes a moral eroticism that is meant to lead to spiritual realization (Danielou, 1994, p. 34). The author professes three main aims in life: love, wealth, and virtue, with the latter to include courage, frankness, self-control, charity, and the search for truth (Danielou, 1994, p. 32). When a couple brings these aims and virtues to sexual union, only then may they aspire to higher levels of spirituality during sex. It is the sentient facet of humanity that allows this kind of transcendence, consciousness, and intentionality and which separates human sexuality from that of animals (Danielou, 1994, p. 35).

Can this perspective be used effectively with Western couples, especially Christians, experiencing sexual dysfunction? Partly, this depends on the source of their problems. First, clinicians must assess and address any medical etiologies before embarking on a path of spiritual sexual enlightenment with couples (Millner & Ullery, 2002; Ullery, Millner, & Willingham, 2002). Once this is accomplished, if a couple expresses openness to spiritual approaches to sex therapy then clinicians have some ideological bases from which to draw.

INFUSING SPIRITUALITY INTO SEX THERAPY

Theological Implications

Given the large proportion of Christians in the United States and diversity of Christian attitudes toward human sexuality, it is important to note that a number of clerics, writers,

and researchers have espoused acknowledging a spiritual dimension to sexual behavior. So, too, for Jewish Kabbalists has there been a history of integrating the sacred with sex (Gotz, 2001). The common thread among these writers appears to be an interpretation and acceptance of sexual expression as congruent with religious and/or spiritual teachings. For example, Stayton (2002) noted that many choose to interpret the Bible literally on some issues (e.g., masturbation and homosexuality) but not on others (e.g., menstruation and slavery), as suits their worldview. Inescapably, humans are sexual beings, and for that writer, the ultimate message of the Bible is one of "the loving relationships of people" (Stayton, 2002, p. 28). According to this view, and similar to tantric wisdom, motives and intentions, not specific acts, are the determinants of sexual virtue and spirituality.

A pastoral counselor, Thorne (2001), has come to the conclusion that sexuality is an intrinsic feature of a spiritual journey. By drawing on centuries of mystic literature that repeatedly uses erotic language to describe peak experiences, including Hebrew and Christian scriptures, Thorne believes that the merging of spirituality with sexuality is a response to God. Analyzing tantric practices and the Bible, Bullis (1998) found a number of shared symbols, concepts, and themes. Chiefly, ideas of sharing and preserving energy, the concept of the body as a sacred expression of the universe, and sexual mystery run through both tantric script and the Bible. In addition, Bullis pointed out that when sex is approached as a ritual and with intentionality, sex can be an expression of prayer and Sabbath. To accomplish this, couples must be present in the moment, make ritual acts fun and congruent with individual tastes (e.g., lighting candles, drawing baths, etc.), and the goal must be mutually valuable (Bullis, 1998, p. 114).

To further indicate that Christians can, indeed, experience ecstatic and God-present sexual encounters, MacKnee (2002) studied 10 Christian individuals who described such events. Though not informed by Eastern philosophy, these persons nonetheless articulated sensations strikingly similar to practicing tantrics. Themes derived from these descriptions include a sense of wonder and amazement, emotional cleansing, euphoria, holistic involvement (nonduality), transcendence, and the evidence of God. Participants in this study also describe postsexual aftereffects such as healing, empowerment, and connection, perhaps indicating a potential therapeutic application to some types of sexual dysfunction, particularly those with psychosocial roots such as relational problems and body image concerns.

Clinical Considerations

Can spirituality fit in with psychotherapy? The psychotherapeutic literature is beginning to reflect an overall rise in spiritual concerns as more and more individuals recognize a need to address clients holistically. For instance, claiming that psychotherapy has been a "secular profession," Beck (2003) explored the historical relationship between psycho-

therapy and spirituality. Here, Beck discussed Freud's role in pathologizing religion and spirituality but noted Jung's positive spiritual bent and argued that there is a need to inject more soul into psychological work. Griffith & Griggs (2001) described a model of religious identity formation based on Marcia's (1966) expansion of Erikson's stage of "identity versus identity diffusion." From this perspective, an individual can go through four, possibly nonlinear, stages of religious identity formation. The stages are explained as diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement, during which an individual may advance toward or retreat from religious allegiance as influenced by life events (Griffith & Griggs, 2001). In a preliminary study, Cashwell (2001) found participants who report higher levels of spirituality viewed counselors as possessing more expertise and trustworthiness. Finally, Wolf and Stevens (2001) outlined expected client benefits with a spiritual inclusion in therapy. Possible among these are increased family cohesion, enhanced physical and mental health, increased community support, and improved ethical considerations (i.e., apropos a crucial component of an individual's or family's life). Although all these ideas require more investigation, they do show a clear interest among researchers and practitioners to incorporate spirituality into therapy.

To date, such writers tend to be making blanket references to psychotherapy and very little mention is made about specifically implementing spiritual sex therapy. Although only a modicum of ground has been broken in this realm, it seems to make sense to pursue this route, albeit with prudence. The historical, intellectual, ideological, and functional connections between human sexuality and spirituality are compelling and create an impetus for scholars and clinicians to fully explore how they interact for therapeutic purposes. Nonetheless, the present lack of a solid empirical foundation in spiritual sex therapy impels a cautious approach.

The feasibility of spiritual sex therapy rests on a number of factors. A critical feature of every account of spiritual sex stated herein is that it does not occur casually and cannot be recreated cavalierly. That is, the blend of body and spirit is done successfully only when there is purpose, meaning, and value attached to it (Helminiak, 1998). Clinicians contemplating a spiritual approach to sex therapy should, then, carefully consider the following points:

1. Counselors must know their own spirituality and how it may affect that of their clients.
2. Counselors must ascertain whether both partners share a similar level of commitment to the therapeutic and spiritual processes.
3. Counselors must ask to what degree religion interfaces with each partner's sense of spirituality.
4. Following on issues of religiosity, counselors have to establish whether Christian clients' beliefs lie more toward an Augustinian (duality) view of body and spirit or Aquinian

(unity of body and spirit) viewpoint. An individual who equates his or her body with shame and derogation may be an inappropriate candidate for spiritual sex therapy, depending on the willingness to explore other points of view.

5. Counselors must practice within their competencies and be familiar with the accomplishments noted in the extant literature. A good example is sexual script theory (Jones & Hostler, 2002). Sexual script theory views sexual behavior as the manifestation of idiosyncratic scripts that are created from unique cultural, interpersonal, and intrapsychic experiences. Utilizing therapeutic tools such as a sexual genogram, the counselor can aid clients with broadening or changing their sexual scripts (Jones & Hostler, 2002). In addition, counselors must educate themselves about pertinent spiritual orientations, acquire specialized training, and network with others in the field.
6. Counselors must recognize that Eastern spiritual approaches may strike some in the United States as "New Age" practices and be offensive (Albury, 2001; Urban, 2000).
7. Counselors should be willing to engage in research in this area.

It is furthermore important for clinicians to be attentive to unique ethical considerations that may arise when infusing a spiritual component into therapy. Issues regarding atypical dual relationships (e.g., religious leader as counselor), displacing religious authority, and laws regarding the separation of church and state can present unforeseen challenges for counselors (Wolf & Stevens, 2001).

These guidelines are simply indicators that more exploration is necessary to realize spiritual sex therapy's potential as a therapeutic tool. As this process is only just beginning, it is important for counselors to be mindful not only of Christian attitudes relating to sexual behavior but also the full range of other spiritual beliefs held by people. The fundamental connection between spirituality and sexuality, their shared pursuit toward wholeness, creates a natural springboard for examining this realm. Certainly this is not a trivial matter. The proportion of Americans who assert a religious loyalty alone justifies a need to follow this course. With thoughtful consideration, the application of spiritual sex therapy holds promise for couples seeking help. What remains is a professional interest in creating models of spiritual sex therapy and investigation that can be tailored to highly personalized visions of spirituality of individuals.

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