

Response

Paul, sex, and the possibility of self-gift: a reply to Timothy Radcliffe

Timothy Radcliffe's reflections on Paul and sexuality ("Glorify God in Your Bodies": I Corinthians 6, 12–20 as a Sexual Ethic', in the July/August issue, pp. 306–314) are a welcome reminder that a 'proper sexual ethics is not ... about what is lawful, but about what is "helpful"' (306). So it is a pity that his own (Pauline) sexual ethic is not as 'helpful' as it might be. For it seems to endorse an unexplored but highly questionable ontology of sex. This response is an attempt to expose that ontology.

Radcliffe reminds us that because we are bodily we are capable of giving ourselves to each other. We are capable of realising our possibility for 'mutual presence' (311). To 'sleep', 'make love', 'have sex' with someone, is one way in which we can do this, one way in which we can realise 'the possibility of presence and union with another' (312). But then he goes on to endorse the view that he attributes to Paul, the view that to sleep with someone *necessarily* is to 'make a gift of oneself'. The argument for this view seems to be that because sleeping with someone is in some sense to become 'one flesh' with them, we give ourselves as gift to them whether or not we intend to or are 'received' as doing so. 'Paul's sexual ethic starts from the belief that, whatever one may intend or think or feel, one does in fact make a radical "self-gift", become one body, when one sleeps with someone' (311). Radcliffe doesn't appear to find this argument odd. But surely it is?

Though it is undoubtedly true that sleeping with someone is fraught with emotional entailment, it is highly questionable that sleeping with someone *necessarily* is to make a radical 'self-gift' (though of course it can be that). Just because one is physically intimate with someone does not mean that one is 'personally' intimate with them, or that one has given oneself in that way of which it makes sense to speak of 'self-gift'. Equally, it is just as questionable to say that sleeping with someone while not intending to share the rest of one's life with them, necessarily is to engage in an 'untruthful act', as Radcliffe would suggest (311). For surely it is possible to sleep with someone just once and in that act give oneself to them totally? On what ground could this possibility be denied? Surely not on Paul's/Radcliffe's view of the matter, which eschews any concern with intention or reception?

Radcliffe appears willingly to engage in a confusion of physical and personal intimacy, event and act. 'Sleeping with someone does not just symbolise or express a unity. 't is being one with them' (311). Without further argument, such a necessary unity can only be affirmed in the most trivial sense—that of sexual intercourse. To equate sex with necessary 'self-gift' requires more than an uncritical assertion.

The same confusion emerges when Radcliffe goes on to talk about food and sex. He tells us that anonymous but public eating—isolated individuals chewing hamburgers in a neon glare—is 'hardly a sin' (311). But it is not difficult to imagine someone—perhaps even ourselves—finding this a disturbing form a human alienation. Does it not illustrate our communal failure to give ourselves to each other, a failure highlighted by the eucharistic sign of communal sharing and self-giving?

None of all this is intended to deny what Radcliffe (after Alasdair MacIntyre) has to say about the narrative unity of our concrete existence in time. But it is intended to suggest that Radcliffe uncritically endorses an ontology of sex that is in fact no other than the myth of sexual union as the crown of personal intimacy and 'self-gift'.

If, as Radcliffe suggests, 'obsession' with sex is a 'flight from sexuality in the deepest sense, a gift of one to another' (313), then the Church itself—with its *ad nauseam* pronouncements on sexuality, its celibate priesthood and restrictions on sexual activity—is surely furthest flown? It, if anyone, is in need of 'therapy' (306). And it could do worse than start with the reflection that a sexual relationship might be the beginning and not the end of intimacy and self-giving: that a 'one night stand' might lead to that marriage of bodies and minds which so many church-sanctioned marriages fail to attain.

This response is a plea that the ontology of sex, the mythology of sexual union, enshrined at the heart of Roman Catholic teaching on sex—'the marriage act ... unites husband and wife in the *closest* intimacy' (cf. *Humanae Vitae* 12)—and apparently endorsed by Radcliffe, be put to the question, yet again; that we cease to confuse physicality with the possibility of 'self-gift', what sex is (biologically) with what it may be (personally) for us.

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