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Sexuality and Spirituality: Possible Bedmates in the Religious Terrain in Contemporary Nigeria

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Introduction

Mere mention of the word 'sex' always sends some signals to those who know its implications in human society. Because many people associate sex (unprotected sex) with AIDS, the word or term, 'sex' is no longer taken as ordinary, but something that has social significance positively or negatively. It is in the light of this that one needs to shed light on the issue of sex, from a religious point of view as a way of providing a model to guide proper understanding and interpretation of sex.

It is a pity that people who talk about sex even in relation to the spread of HIV/AIDS, protection of women's dignity against rape, amongst others, tend to overlook the place of religion in understanding human sexuality. (Akintunde 2002:63).

Hence, the following fundamental, but also pertinent questions: what is sex from a religious point of view? What potency does religious thinking have in understanding human sexuality? To what degree has religious thinking helped to shape and reshape the mentality of Nigerians about sex? What are the functions that religious organizations play in enhancing proper understanding of human sexuality? How do we sustain such thinking in the light of modernity and globalization? What are the contradictions or discrepancies between the religions or religious beliefs on sexuality issues? What is the position of religion on some cultural practices like levirate marriage which some suggest that the government should enforce? With so much secrecy attached to sexuality, what are the implications for health? And finally, what are the implications of religious fundamentalisms on sexual rights and social cohesion? These are issues for discussion in this work.

On the surface, it is obvious that the two words – sexuality and spirituality are sociological and theological words. As shall be pointed out in this essay, the two are mutually exclusive. This assertion is based on the fact that in Africa, there is no line of demarcation between the secular and the profane. (Abogunrin 1989:266 - 296) From the look of things, sexuality is a secular matter. But the fact, which we need to understand from the onset, is that as far as Africans are concerned, (leaning on the attitude of interpreting every life situation religiously), sexuality has religious flavour.

Providing reason and justification for this assertion is not a problem. One, Africans believe that sex or the sexual apparatus, (penis and vagina) are biological elements inherently implanted in man by God right from the time man was created. Theologically, God has a purpose for creating these organs and when they should be used and how and who are to use them at specific times.

Because sex takes place in the social environment, the society leaning on religious prescriptions and the theological interpretation of sex places some social values on sex. What follows these are some moral and at times legal rules associated with who has sex, with who, where and what time. It is in the light of this that sexuality today is not only a social issue, but also a theological issue. And discussing it is very important given the spread of HIV/AIDS in our continent generally, and particularly in Nigeria - the problems that often arise as a result of abuse of sex or sexuality.

Sex and Spirituality

In traditional society, sex has a spiritual dimension because it involves the fusion of a man and a woman. The fusion could produce good result only if the sexual partners are united spiritually and if not, the fusion would yield bad result. Most marriages break because the husband and the wife are not united spiritually. The religious interpretation is that the would-be husband of a woman and would-be wife of a man have already been settled at the spiritual level. The Yoruba talk about *oko orun*, (heavenly husband) and *aya orun*, (heavenly wife). The night of the first meeting between a married man and woman is spiritually coated. The bloodshed associated with virginity is interpreted to have spiritual dimension. That is why some people regard it as something that cements the relationship between the man and the woman.

However, we observe that the issue of virginity needs to be reflected upon as it is directed to one of the sexual partners. While the culture stipulates that the girl ought to be chaste, it is silent on the part of the male, not because man should not be chaste, but because women are more vulnerable to sexual related disease than men. In fact, African culture teaches about the need for men to be chaste during the puberty rites. But in contemporary society, there is the need to balance our position regarding the social implication of virginity as it relates to man and woman, given the fact that sexuality is an enterprise between two people. Therefore, what is good for the woman is equally good for the man. In other words, if a girl's honesty could be detected by her being a virgin, how do we detect that of the man? In our opinion, both are enjoined to be chaste; and in this case there may be the need to embark upon medical tests to verify the virginity of both.

This is necessary at this stage due to the high prevalence of the HIV/AIDS. Such a medical check up would not only prevent the innocent bride from being a victim, it would also curb the spread of the disease. Sex, therefore, should be taken as a medical and a spiritual enterprise. The traditional belief is that some who have sex with the 'wrong women' may die spiritually for life. This explains why traditional magicians and medicine men always abstain from sex whenever they are preparing some specific magic or medicine of high and spiritual potency. At the time they are undergoing some ritual and religious purification, they

abstain totally from sex. Having sex during ritual purification is believed to have the tendency to dampen the spirit of those involved in the sexual act.

In Islam and Christianity too, sex is equally seen as having the capacity to kill man's spirituality. This is the reason why some stay away from sex during fasting or special prayer. For example, during Ramadan period, Muslims are enjoined to abstain from sex. The same goes for the Christians. In essence, sex is interpreted to have spiritual flavour in African society. For the purpose of emphasis we need to discuss the specific teachings of the three major religions on sex. This is important to avoid any form of generalization.

Religious Teachings About Sex

Examining the issue of sex from the perspective of the three major religions in Nigeria – Traditional religion, Christianity and Islam will avail every person belonging to any of the faiths opportunity to learn one or two things.

Traditional Religion

The popular belief of African Traditional Religion about sex is that it is sacred; that is, it has religious flavour. (Kayode 1986:51) The sacredness of sex is exemplified in the fact that

- (a) it must be performed mainly by husband and wife. Hence, there is no room for premarital and extramarital sex
- (b) it must be performed at night and not in the afternoon, as prescribed in some religious taboos placed on sex. For example, the belief is that any couple that has sex in the afternoon will give birth to an albino child. Albinos are "*eni orisa*", that is, those who belong to the divinities. Thus, they are not ordinary children. Unlike other "normal" children, they have to observe "the do's and don'ts" associated with belonging to *Orisa*. Yoruba people or traditional religionists dread offending the divinities.
- (c) Other places where sex must not be performed include the farmland so that the ancestors of the land would not be offended. It is no wonder then that there are specific rituals that must also be performed whenever anybody broke any of the taboos associated with sex.
- (d) Sex is considered sacred in all its forms and interpretation. And as a matter of fact, it is something that must not be talked about. It is no wonder that activities often associated with sex such as kissing and petting are not so common in Africa, especially when done in or around public places. Anything that relates to romance and sex is to be done secretly.

All the above examples clearly show how traditional religious beliefs about sex shape the thinking of the African man. Arising from this background, the practice of pornography, which is common in the contemporary society, is

theologically, socially and morally objectionable because of its tendency to lead people to show disrespect for man and woman and their private parts.

For instance, Africans, especially Yoruba people, do not call male or female private parts by their real biological names. They call them names that people would not easily associate with sex. For example, any reference to any of these parts on the electronic media would be done in a way that very young people would be unable to decipher what the discussion is all about. This does not suggest that Africans had no forum for sex education. After all, we are aware of various puberty rites geared towards educating the younger ones.

On account of the above examples, traditional African society, based on its religious mentality about sex, forbids adultery, homosexuality, masturbation, lesbianism, incest among other things. These are not only taken as sexual immoralities, they are taken also as sin against God on the one hand, and against society on the other hand. Thus, anyone who commits any of these offences would be ostracized. Anyone guilty of incest, bestiality and homosexuality would be excommunicated.

To caution people from engaging in these, the society made provision for a magical medicine such as *Magun*, meaning, “don’t climb” or “*teso*” which is placed on a girl to discourage promiscuity. In fact according to Ogunsakin-Fabarebo (1988:20), we have over thirty-five types of *Magun*. Whenever it is placed on a woman, any man who has a sexual affair with her will suffer one injury or the other and at times, death.

The traditional African religions place high premium on virginity, which according to Abogunrin (1989:278) is tantamount to sexual purity, which is mandatory within marriage. A virgin girl does not only boost her own social status, she also by her act of fidelity and faithfulness, does honour to her parents.

Christianity

The Bible, God’s revelation of Himself and His creation, gives the rightful place of sex in marriage with dignity and sacredness. Thus, whether viewed from the protestant or Catholic perspectives, sex or sexual intercourse is interpreted as a natural and God-given phenomenon, and therefore cannot be evil in itself. (Jones 1984: 121). In the same vein, properly directed sexual intercourse and even sexual inclination are not considered to be evil or sinful. It is the use to which sexual intercourse is put that determines whether or not it is sinful.

This therefore, suggests that there are theological and sociological guidelines regarding sex or sexual activities. Christianity sanctions sexual activity mainly between a husband and wife. This is precisely the theology of sexuality in Christendom. There are some issues arising from the assertion, which are worthy of examination.

- (i) Sex is seen as serving the purpose of procreation on the one hand and provision of pleasure on the other hand. For instance, apart from procreation, the Bible enjoins the husband and the wife not to deny each other conjugal rights. This religious thinking shapes the morality of Christians regarding sex to the extent that the Church teaches against bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism, masturbation etc. on this O' Donovan (1996: 284) strongly remarks that, *Practices such as adultery, sexual immorality, homosexuality, incest, bestiality and other impure practices are all an abomination to God...on which He has pronounced a severe judgment.*
- (ii) In addition to the above, the Church appreciates virginity. In fact, in the early Church, virginity was widely praised by the Fathers. They also encouraged celibacy for those who are disciplined spiritually. In all, Christianity teaches that coitus is honourable and deeply significant to man as a creature of God (Mk 10: 7ff; 1st Corinthians 7:14; 1Peter 3:7). To drive home our point here, we shall consider Paul's sexual guidelines for Christians. We are focussing on Paul because most of the moral teachings guiding Christians are inherent in his books and this does not leave out the issue of sex and sexuality (Olori: 2003).

As already discussed, it is no gainsaying that sex plays a vital role in marriage. It is not merely erotic and for pleasure, it serves the purpose of intensifying the love that a couple has for one another. It has therapeutic power, healing wounded emotions and egos. It functions as the instrument for forgiveness and reconciliation. The bodily attraction of a couple also unites their soul and intensifies their yearnings for one another, purifying and strengthening their aspirations and life ambitions. This is succinctly put by Kellan R. Allan, (1975:108) *Marriage is made that the tensions of life are relieved through conjugal love*

Allan further notes that in the sexual act, creative energies are released in the lives of both husband and wife. He agrees with Paul in 1st Corinthian 7:5 that, in intercourse, all the love expressed in act and word is consummated in communion and union. This expression of love is holy and thus could be expressed to only one's marriage spouse. (Kellan R. Allan 1975:108).

Paul in this verse opines that the normal situation in life is for each man to possess his own wife and each woman her own husband. His teaching here conforms to Jewish opinion that marriage was originally instituted for normal conjugal relationship between a couple. This same principle holds sway for Christianity and should therefore not be altered according to Paul. Paul was acquainted with the cycle of hurt or unfulfilled intimacy amongst couples of his day. Like in contemporary society, there were couples who had suffered frustrations arising from unfulfilled intimacy. There might have been many who endured their sexual relationships rather than enjoyed it. Such frustrations and

unsatisfied libido is bound to charge the atmosphere in the home with violence which aggression might be transferred to members in the Church. To avoid this, he emphasised the fact that sexual desire is divinely endowed upon man to be fulfilled in marriage. Therefore, it is obligatory for couples to share their bodies with each other in mutual respect and physical attraction.

We believe that there is an issue about sexuality, which we need to reflect upon. This has to do with levirate marriage. This is a contentious issue, on the grounds that a school of thought believes that it should be discouraged. Levirate marriage although supported by the Bible dehumanises the womenfolk. It makes a woman an object that could be passed on within the family fold. This view in our opinion could be flawed on the basis that it is an attempt to care for the widow and the offspring. However, we believe that the affected people (women in this case) could be consulted or their opinions sought before they are married to their in-law.

It is also a known fact that in most cases, such in-laws, in age and status, are oftentimes subordinate to the woman, thus this is an aspect of the culture, which is barbaric and should be discouraged. We are not to legitimize the Biblical practices, but the fact is that culture is dynamic. We cannot say that the Biblical injunctions are infallible otherwise we would continue with slavery.

Islamic Religion

Islam regards sex as one of the human instincts and its satisfaction as theological, and legitimate. Islam, therefore, teaches that sexual pleasure is good and it is a gift from God which should however, be consummated within marriage. (Mawdud: 1986:18). It is on this ground that Islam instructs that sex outside of marriage is evil and sin, punishable by God and man.

The impression here is that sex within marriage is a solemn contract of responsibility and thus, adultery is sin. This religious thinking makes Muslims to categorise some sexual activities as *haram*. These are prostitution, adultery, fornication, bestiality, and homosexuality among others. *Haram* in the context of the essay suggests actions forbidden. Every act of sexual immorality in Islam, therefore, is regarded as *Ziyah*. So, whoever is found committing any of the listed sexual immoral practices will go to hell following God's judgment. Meanwhile, on earth, the person is entitled to a hundred lashes of cane.

The *Umma*, therefore, engage in sexual education to ensure that Muslims know what is right or wrong with regard to sex. Today, in attempt to facilitate sexual ethos, some Islamic movements organise seminars and workshops for their members towards promotion of sexual education. It is in the light of this that the Umma condemned the use of indecent dressing, pornography and fashion parade especially during the Miss World Contest that held in Nigeria. It is also on

the account of the above that the Umma encourages young ladies and women to wear the *hijab* so that they would not expose their bodies.

On this we need to note that the over-flogging of dress code due to a religious perspective could violate the sexual rights of women and by so doing can affect societal cohesion. We are saying this in the light of the Muslims' desire to enforce a dress code on the populace. But this in our own opinion should not be the case. While we are not advocating for nudity, at the same time, there is the need to have a level of freedom on the issue of dressing. Apart from this, each profession has what we could refer to as suitable dress codes for such professions. Thus, this should not be an issue to destabilize the peace and unity of the country.

Religious Organisations and the Promotion of Sexuality Education

As a matter of fact, religious organisation do not close their eyes to the ugly situation associated with sex and sexuality in the contemporary times. They have launched a strong campaign against this. In Christian circles for example, through sermons, and Sunday school teachings, the Church has been preaching and advising followers to desist from sexual immorality, given the injunction that adulterers will go to hell fire. Some Christians who have cyber café always discourage their customers from browsing pornographic and gay sites. Some Christian filmmakers like Mount Zion among others through their films teach against sexual immorality.

In the same vein, Muslim scholars and preachers engage in sexuality education via seminars, workshops and training about the importance of virginity, and fidelity in marriage. They counsel the married and the widow on the sanctity of sex. Not only this, they also assist in kind and cash in alleviating the plight of people living with HIV/AIDS. They usually invite experts and professionals to educate members. All these point to the sacredness and spirituality of sex.

Indeed, it is high time that the society sheds the cloak of secrecy surrounding the issue of sexuality. And in this respect, sexual education should start from the home, as the home is the first school for a child or an individual. A child who has been tutored at home on the sexual parts of the body and the effect of early exposure to sex would not go out on an exploration spree, in an attempt to satisfy his/her sexual urge. A child should be taught to respect his/her body and regard it as the body of Christ or the image of God. In this wise, such a child would respect other people's body and thus rule out cases of rape, incest and homosexuality.

Similarly, child marriage specifically in the Northern part of the country in the name of religion should be discouraged. Apart from eroding on the right of the child, it has led to severe exposure to various sexually transmitted diseases and the Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF) condition.

The Influence of Globalisation

The end of twentieth century, which ushered in globalization, has produced some factors that have affected the religious thinking of Africans about sex. This comes through global communication networks like the Internet, cable television and others. (Ayantayo 1999: 132). The society whose values about sex hitherto were shaped by religious beliefs and doctrines garbed in taboos and sanctions now have access to the other side of the coin. The society has access to pornographic and erotic sites etc. Today, sexual activities can be watched on the Internet. What used to be sacred is no longer sacred. It has been made open through exposure of the population, including teenagers to blue films.

Despite the fact that some cyber cafés prohibit access to these sites during the day, some still access them at night. Besides, the idea that one can only talk about sex when one is ripe for it (that is, when one is biologically and socially ripe) is no longer tenable. Today, there is a provision for what is called “chat” on the Internet between two lovers. Today, one can date a lady or a man for marriage through the Internet. Some of these ladies and men apart from providing their personal pictures provide information about parts of their bodies, such as the size of the breast, the colour of the eye, the perfume they use, the size of their buttock, their favourite music, food and dance steps. At times, they display their nudity in order to appeal to their potential and prospective lovers. We have access to the above information during our visits to cyber cafés on the campus of University of Ibadan.

The exposure of teenagers to information about sex has led to widespread pre-marital sex and to some extent extramarital sexual affairs in the contemporary Nigerian society. Worse still, the early exposure of teenagers to sex has resulted in a disturbing increase in teen pregnancy. Such pregnancy dramatically affects both the girl and her loved ones. It is on this note that *Awake magazine* described teen pregnancy as a global tragedy. (Awake 2004).

Suggestions

Religious organisations should disseminate moral teachings through the publication of magazines, papers and workbooks that would enhance sexual morality. The task to enhance sexual morality is for all of us. Hence, there is the need to go back to African methods of social control, which has religious flavour. Allowing this to come back will help to enhance the place and significance of public opinion in shaping the values of members of the society.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is obvious that there is correlation between sex and spirituality. The three major religions practiced in Nigeria provide sufficient

information on this assertion. In the same vein such information is good enough to enhance better understanding of human sexuality from the religious point of view, and from which the secular society can learn a lot. Hence, we have a collective task to fight sex-related diseases that have been destroying our contemporary society. For this reason, the observation of Ifemesia (1985:257) is worthy of note as he states that:

...parents should make efforts to explain to their children the precise circumstances, under which sexual relations are meaningful and honourable. For frankness over sex is helping people to get over their inhibitions; reason gives way to sensuality. And therefore, our children (and adults alike) must be not only be intelligent, but also, so sex-informed that they are no longer curious.

On the final note, we strongly recommend that religious organisations should double their efforts in promoting sexual awareness education not only among the teenagers, but also among married people. Such campaign teams should go to hotels, restaurants and even recreation centres. The fact still remains that religion is still a significant force in Nigeria in enhancing human sexuality. After all, both the Quran and the Bible teach that adulterer/adulteress would be cast to fire on the day of judgment. For religious organisations to carry this task effectively, their leaders should lead by example. The time to promote proper understanding of human sexuality via religion is now and the task is for everyone who professes one faith or the other.

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