



Is Morality Outdated?
Spiritual Principles Guiding
Sexual Behaviour

Is Morality Outdated?

Spiritual Principles Guiding Sexual Behaviour

A booklet produced as part of the Report on Sexual Morality
to help facilitate thought and discussion

by

Stephen Russell-Lacy, Michael Stanley and Helen Laidlaw

Thanks to Helen Curry for help with the layout and illustrations

Published by

The General Conference of the New Church 2007

Copies may be downloaded from either:

www.new-church-lifeline.org.uk

or

www.generalconference.org.uk

Foreword

Sexual Morality as Seen from a Spiritual Viewpoint (July 2006) is the Report of a Study Group set up by the Committee of Ministers and Governing Council of the New Church Conference. The members of the Study Group were Mrs J Jones, Mrs H Laidlaw, Mr S Russell-Lacy (Convenor) and Rev M Stanley.

It was felt it would be useful if the Report could be adapted and shortened with the aim of publishing material for helping people at the grass roots to engage in talking about the issues. Consequently in January 2007 the convenor of the Group was asked if some of the Group could produce this booklet, which is based on the Report, for local church congregations to use as a focus for local discussion. This booklet is the result. It is intended as a supplement to the Report rather than any replacement.

Introduction

Each local church society as a whole might wish to become involved in the discussion of what it considers to be appropriate personal conduct. This booklet is designed to help in this process, by offering material on some spiritual principles. Also provided is a set of fictitious situations for the consideration of groups in the church wishing to explore a shared perception of relevant issues.

Only when people in the church engage in the process of exploring the application of religion to life, can any deeper understanding and shared view emerge of what sort of behaviour is to be deemed appropriate for a person in different kinds of situation and what sort of behaviour is or is not contributory to the spiritual welfare of the community.

An important distinction needs to be made between:

- discussing standards locally as abstract principles as opposed to
- dealing with a possible moral infringement by a particular person in a particular situation.

This is because it can be difficult to approach someone who seems to be behaving improperly and impossible to have any kind of clear thinking discussion in the context of an emotionally laden crisis.

Discussion *before* local disputes arise can help prevent such crises. For only when there is a common knowledge and acknowledgment of the spiritual truths involved can a community be enabled to nip such problems in the bud.

This is not to say the church should not think through what is an appropriate response to those in its midst who may be breaking currently accepted norms of proper sexual behaviour. But where such a crisis does develop and there is disagreement about correct and incorrect personal conduct, it will need very careful handling. Spiritual principles should be seen shining forth in the sphere and attitude of all those belonging to the church as well as in their response to disorderly conduct.

Therefore the Study Group believe that there is a great need for local discussion:

- To recognise that people in the church vary as to the extent they want or believe they should be told what suitable personal sexual behaviour is.
- To engage people in thinking about the topic
- To make use of individual appreciation of the complexities of life
- To enable people to work out their own answers based on spiritual teachings of the New Church as provided in the booklet
- To help church communities create a shared view

Accordingly this booklet has an appendix with suitable material for group discussion.

Scenario 4

Ronald and Amy have been married for ten years and are members of a local church congregation. They are childless although have talked about adopting. In the last 12 months there have been growing problems between them. They end up having rows on a weekly basis and their sex life, which used to be mutually satisfying, seems to have gone off the agenda completely. They argue over a range of things – who does what in the garden, how much overtime he should work, whether to spend savings on garden improvements and so on. It doesn't seem to matter what the issue is they still communicate about it in a destructive way. They have so fallen out with each other that a month ago they decided to split up. And now they have visited their solicitors with a view to divorce.

Scenario 5

Frank who is in his forties is single. He keeps himself fit and smart looking and has had a series of girlfriends usually developing into sexual relationships each lasting a few months. This had become a regular pattern to his life. It was he who usually broke things off. Although not a member he regularly attends his local church and contributes to fund-raising efforts. During chats after Sunday service the subject of marriage occasionally cropped up and he felt uncomfortable at these times.



stayed the weekend. She uses the contraceptive pill and they take no other precautions. They keenly look forward to seeing each other but they have not discussed with each other the future of their relationship. Neither of their families knows of their level of intimacy.

Scenario 2

Sandra and Geoffrey are both in their late twenties and they live together in a small house that they jointly rent. Their friends and family know about this arrangement as it has lasted for over 2 years. They come from a church background but neither has been to Sunday services for several years. They talk with each other expressing affection and hope that the relationship they enjoy will last but there has been no talk of marriage. They are now intending to buy a home together and are visiting estate agents. Sandra has tentatively voiced the idea of their having a child. Geoffrey seems amenable to this although not just yet.

Scenario 3

Tracey and Phillip are married with 2 sons aged 12 and 9 years. Phillip is a respected leader at his local church. The couple seem to have had the usual ups and downs of married life. However, recently things seem to be more down than up. Phillip is getting more and more fed up with Tracey's irritable moods and she is cross about the amount of time he spends away from the home. There is an attractive woman member at the local squash club called Janet and he has been in her company with the other players after matches at a pub where neither is known. Recently, he has been giving her a lift home and when saying goodnight, Janet and he kiss. He sees nothing amiss with this as long as it doesn't hurt Tracey but realises he cannot trust Janet to keep their friendship a secret.

Moral Code in the Word and the Writings



To what extent can we derive a moral code directly from what is written in the Word and the Writings? This is similar to the question, "Are there any *timeless* moral directives, or do all moral codes remain open to change as cultures and circumstances change?"

A typical response by many would probably be to refer to the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament as a permanent moral basis for all time. But when we look into these in detail a number of problems arise. For example:

- What does the commandment to not work on the Sabbath to keep it holy mean (Exodus 20: 10) when it was good for Jesus to work as a healer on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-5)? And these days are emergency services, personal care and health staff - not to mention the clergy - constantly breaking this commandment by operating on Sundays?

So this illustrates that we need to consider changing times and cultures before retaining moral requirements from a past era.

- We are commanded not to steal (Exodus 20:15). But can there not be circumstances where it might be charitable for us, say, to 'steal' an alcoholic's bottle, or steal a gun from a homicidal maniac?

This illustrates how we may need to consider particular circumstances where sticking to a particular moral injunction may be spiritually uncharitable.

- Then there are cases where it is difficult if not impossible to know exactly what it is that is being said to be immoral. For example, Jesus mentions adultery and sexual immorality as evil

desires of the heart (Matt 15:19) but does not define what sexual immorality is in practice.

This illustrates the necessity that can often arise for *interpretation* of moral statements before they can be meaningful and applicable to guide one's behaviour.

It is also the case that Swedenborg's book *Conjugal Love* and his other writings do not clearly spell out what is meant by immoral sexual conduct. He makes no mention for example of cohabitation, pornography, voyeurism, masturbation, petting etc. However, the New Church rightly believes his writings include a wonderful Divine revelation of *spiritual* principles in the Word relevant to human sexual relationships such as charity, providence and conjugal love.

Spiritual principles are not fixed behavioural dos and don'ts that may need to be modified with changing time and circumstances. Rather, they are there to timelessly illuminate and guide a person's use of reason in all matters of life, including morality in the sexual domain. They are there to act as a 'light' to help us see what is actually around and really happening, so to speak, so that we may see potential dangers and/or the best path or steps to take next. In this sense spiritual principles are the guides for a truly moral life – not just an unthinking, unfeeling and rigid application of some set of moral injunctions to every circumstance one meets.

Charity and Non-judgmentalism

Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. Matt 7:12

Swedenborg describes relevant values we would like others to apply when relating to us as including sincerity and uprightness, charity, chastity, temperance, truth, prudence and benevolence. (D Wis 10). The disciplines of self-restraint and selfless love that need to be practised within any close relationship - and that can only foster a person's spiritual development - apply equally to the sexual relationship.

APPENDIX

Fictitious Situations for Group Discussion

It is suggested that congregational members could meet together in a small group or groups to discuss which of the listed bullet pointed statements is closest to their attitude as applied to each of the scenarios provided below. It would be useful if a group leader could arrange printed copies of the material to be made available to each person.

It would help if after reading out loud each scenario the group leader asks the group to consider which of the following statements fits closest to how each group member thinks about each fictitious individual.

- Behaving appropriately,
- Making an error of judgment,
- Failing to follow spiritual principles

The leader's role is to keep the discussion focused on the task and try to keep before the group the teachings of the New Church as outlined in this booklet which it is hoped everyone will have had a chance to read beforehand. The aim is for members of each group to learn from each other regarding the application and meaning of these spiritual principles. There is no need to reach complete agreement. Different views should be respected.

Scenario 1

Barry and Brigit initially met in the Church youth club although they had not seen each other for several years until 4 months ago since when they have been together on a fairly regular basis. They call themselves boyfriend and girlfriend because they have an understanding that neither is seeing anyone else. They don't say this to their friends but each disapproves of the lax sexual standards in the media. He is aged 20 and works in the car industry and she is aged 18 and is a student. They live about 70 miles apart. The sexual side to their relationship started a month after their first date when Brigit visited his flat and

People may ask:

- Isn't sex a basic drive that needs to be satisfied, just like hunger and thirst?
- Isn't sexual expression one of our inherent freedoms?
- Isn't sexuality a way of expressing our unique individuality

To answer yes to these questions may be correct but it is to miss the point, for it ignores the idea of chastity, which is central to conjugal love. Chastity is a somewhat antiquated term in today's world. However it is a word that conveys a sense of purity, innocence, and decency with respect to sexual partnership. It also unfortunately has a connotation of not letting oneself have any fun, and of prudishness, but this is *not* the way the Writings for the New Church use it. Rather it is primarily concerned with a person's attitude, what is going on in a person's mind and heart - with the purity of a person's thoughts and feelings. (CL 140). A chaste attitude is a deep desire for a one to one relationship. It includes not wanting to hurt your partner by having sexual relationships outside the partnership. Swedenborg talks about the fact that a person's love and respect for lasting partnerships can become more and more purified or chaste (see CL 145). He also says that purification takes place to the extent that people stay away from what is impure. This includes not only infidelity and loose sexual conduct but also things such as harbouring indecent thoughts about someone. Chastity means that a conjugal relationship is regarded as holy. The more "chaste" our thoughts and intentions are, the more the Lord can lead us towards happiness in this relationship. Impure sexual thoughts are perversions of the chaste attitude of conjugal love.



The term 'sexual immorality' in common usage has acquired a judgmental, moralistic connotation. This is probably because it is rightly recognised that it is not charitable to look for the fault in others. We need to get away from an unfeeling, judgmental and moralistic tone of previous generations in the church. As the Word of God says:

Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.
Matt 7:1-2

Yet the Lord also teaches, "*Stop judging by mere appearances, and make a right judgment*" *John 7:24*

So there is a right type of judging as well as a wrong one. A distinction should be made between making a judgment concerning behaviour and adopting a judgmental attitude. Judging between what is orderly and disorderly should not mean being judgmental about the *person*. However it should include trying to help discern attitudes that are and are not conducive to conjugal love. Our aim should be, from love, to help us all see when our behaviour is harmful to spiritual well-being and happiness. At the same time people should be left in freedom to make their own judgement as to how they wish to proceed. We probably need to learn better how to clarify what our community regards as disorderly sexual behaviour without being insensitive, prudish or discriminatory. However this clarification of moral issues does not necessarily mean giving all the answers in a black and white way that some may expect or prefer. For what is in harmony with good spiritual order (true charity) may well vary from one situation to the next.

Divine Providence and Permission of Disorder

The words of the Word and Swedenborg's Writings in their original languages carry a wide range of meaning often misleadingly translated by the heavy English word 'sin'. The old Church interpretation of the term 'sin' was as an affront to God who might angrily bring down righteous punishment.. The Study Group believe this is not a New

Church view but rather it is more spiritual to think in terms of grades of spiritual disorder e.g. from mild misdemeanours to serious acts of abusive violence. And this applies to all aspects of behaviour, including sexual matters.

When we live according to heavenly principles we are in a better position to receive heavenly influx. It is this that enables people to experience the depth of joy and fulfilment that is potentially there in all of us. Yet at the same time, the Writings teach us that of ourselves, we retain a universal human tendency to break God's laws everyday in our hearts in one way or another, e.g. pride, envy, jealousy, lust, or adulterous feelings or other self-centred emotions.

Under Divine Providence this external aspect of being human is brought into prominence so that it can be seen and tackled and also to preserve human freedom. God may thus permit what is disorderly in human conduct for the sake of a higher good. For example concubines may have been permitted to some men in Old Testament times as preferable to roaming lust. Yet acting in sexually disordered ways just like other disordered behaviour can be very hazardous for spiritual growth and the ability to experience heaven within. Therefore we still need general guidance regarding sexual mores as well as spiritual principles.



Conjugal love

Swedenborg's term conjugal love indicates a uniquely intimate love towards one person of the opposite sex (as opposed towards any or all of the opposite sex). Conjugal love is a spiritual love rather than a natural love. It involves far more than the mutual physical attraction between two persons of the opposite sex that is commonly referred to as love.

Within the intimacy of a single loving sexual relationship, two human beings can better learn to treat and care for one another with courtesy, respect and empathetic understanding – despite knowing intimately all the faults and weaknesses of their partner. They can thereby become more closely united in heart and mind.

The Writings of Swedenborg stand in an absolutely unique position relative to the entire body of the world's thought about sexuality, for they contain revelation about the *spiritual* basis of sex. The eternal conjunction of love and wisdom, that most fundamentally defines God's nature, is mirrored, as an "image" (Genesis 1:27, 5:1), in the ideal spiritual union of a man and a woman, a more perfect such image than either partner could achieve alone.

The state of conjugal love involves a looking to, or realisation of, a special kind of relationship. It includes for example in your heart wanting to give time to be available for your partner when needed.

Love taken by itself is nothing but a desire and hence an impulse to be joined; conjugal love is an impulse to be joined into one. For the male and the female of the human species are so created as to be able to become like a single individual, that is, one flesh; and when united, then they are, taken together, the full expression of humanity. If not so joined, they are two, each being as it were a divided person or half a person... That impulse to be joined lies deeply hidden in every part of both male and female, and every part has the ability and desire to be joined into one. CL 37

The conjugal *state* within the individual is said to arise with the linking of goodness in the heart with truth in the mind. In a conjugal *relationship* this is taking place with crossover between the partners – each having a good effect on the other. It is this state of conjugal love between a man and woman that is central to the experience of deeply felt joy and peace. Hence Jesus said that there is no marriage in heaven of the kind entered into for merely natural or worldly reasons (Matt 22:30)