

Ecstasy of the Earth: Some Implications of Thomas Berry's Thought for Sexual Ethics

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Those of us who study Thomas Berry know that he not only draws upon many different fields of knowledge but also offers ways of thinking about—or at least hints at ways of thinking about—the connection between the new story of the evolutionary development of the universe (“New Story” or “Universe Story”) and other human endeavors, such as science, religion, technology, law, economics, urban design, education and healthcare, to name a few. But what did Berry say about sexuality and sexual ethics? How does the sexual dimension of our personhood relate to the New Story? What is the ontological status and purpose of human sexual desire if we take the cosmology of the New Story seriously?

Given the many symptoms of sexual dysfunction in our culture, both inside and outside Christian Churches, I argue that “reinventing the human” without also reinventing human sexuality would be impossible. Accordingly, I believe Berry must be critiqued for offering no guidelines with regards to sexuality. In fact, a close reading of his work with this concern in mind leaves one with the sense that despite references to a vast array of subjects, he seems to have gone out of his way to avoid sexuality, the body in its sexual dimension, and the general erotic aspect of human life. Other than references to early forms of plant and animal sexual reproduction in the *The Universe Story*,¹ and one mention of sexuality addressed below, Berry never even uses the word “sexual” or “erotic,” in any of his writings, nor does he even hint how, for example, we might grapple with related ethical questions concerning overpopulation and procreation.

1. Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Beginning of the Ecozoic Era—A Celebration of the Unfolding Cosmos* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994)

We can certainly understand some of the obvious reasons for this omission. After all, Berry was a celibate priest. Moreover, one could argue that avoiding sexual ethics and church doctrine in general is the reason he escaped the Vatican censorship faced by so many other progressive thinkers of his time. However, we must also concede that Berry was a product of his era and of the monastic sexual formation he would have received in the late 1930's. While Berry's subsequent travel and cross-cultural exposure propelled his intellectual development far beyond the doctrinal confines of pre-Vatican II theology, it would seem that his thinking on sexuality never benefited from that same level of development. Yet it also seems that he personally had a well-integrated sexuality and was genuinely called to the celibate life. Perhaps the sensitivity he felt towards creation had, on some level, an erotic dimension whereby the sexual drive was transmuted into a sense of wholeness and communion found in the beauty of nature. Possibly Berry never addressed sexuality because it was simply not an issue of major concern for him.

Nonetheless, there remains a desperate need for an ecozoic understanding of sexuality from which the non-celibate, vast majority of the planet's human beings might find inspiration and ethical guidance. How could we even begin to find our way into the future without addressing one of the most powerful drives of the human experience that involves, among many other things, our very ability to reproduce? It is time to add a sexual chapter to the New Story. While Berry never gave us directions or content on the subject, I argue that his articulation of the New Story does offer the necessary context and a map of the terrain.

Given our limited starting point, the task of articulating an ecozoic understanding of sexuality requires the insights of others already doing sexual ethics. In particular, we need the insights of those who are challenging the assumptions of traditional Christian sexual ethics and models used by, for example, official Roman Catholic teaching. These new voices in sexual ethics include both Roman Catholic and Protestant systematic theologians, as well as contextual theologies, including feminist, gay, black, liberationist and disabled perspectives, to name a view. Combined with other new social-scientific approaches to sexuality, a plethora of recent scholarship offers

the framework for sexuality that Berry never provided.²

Remarkably, many of the core insights of the new voices integrate quite well with Berry's cosmology. As we will touch upon below, themes such as the centrality of contextual meaning or lived experience (or "relational-centered," as opposed to "act-centered" sexual ethics), the diversity of sexual expression, the evolving nature of human sexuality, the critique of "procreationism," along with a general assertion that sexuality is enmeshed in larger socio-political contexts, all offer creative avenues for dialogue between sexual ethics and Berry's work. I suggest that such a dialogue could not only correct the missing dimension of sexuality in Berry's thought, but could also enhance our understanding of sexual ethics by situating sexuality within a larger ecological and cosmological context.

The Value of Story

In principle number seven of the "Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process,"³ we can find Berry's one reference to sexual-

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2. See, for example: Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008); Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006); Marvin Mahan Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996); Daniel T. Spencer, *Gay and Gaia: Ethics, Ecology, and the Erotic* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1996); Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); Traci W. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006); Elizabeth Stuart, "Disruptive Bodies: Disability, Embodiment, and Sexuality," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, eds. Kelly Brown and Douglas Marvin M. Ellison (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 322-337.
 3. Thomas Berry, "Twelve Principles for Understanding the Universe and the Role of the Human in the Universe Process," in Anne Lonergan and Caroline Richards, eds., *Thomas Berry & the New Cosmology* (Mystic: Connecticut: Twenty-Third Publications), 108-09.

ity: "All particular life systems in their being, their sexuality, their nourishment, their education, their governing, their healing, their fulfillment, must integrate their functioning within this larger complex of mutually dependent Earth systems."⁴ In this principle Berry affirms sexuality as a central dimension of our being commensurate with other fundamentals such as nourishment, healing and fulfillment, and he also implies that sexuality can only properly exist in the "larger complex of mutually dependent Earth systems." That is, Berry's single reference to the subject comes with only one ethical imperative: that one's sexuality must be integrated into a larger ecological context.

One way of appreciating this insight is to contrast Berry with traditional theological anthropology and the sexual ethics derived therefrom, particularly as expressed in official Roman Catholic teaching. Even for non-Catholics, or non-religious people, the legacy of Christian understandings of sexuality continues to inform contemporary assumptions about sex in ways we can barely even measure, especially insofar as sexuality has been historically intertwined with the doctrine of original sin. And indeed, as many feminist voices have demonstrated, the "patriarchal put-down" of women, the body, and sexuality goes hand in hand with the debasing of the natural world.⁵

Yet I want to draw attention to an even more fundamental theological problem, a problem that is especially acute in Roman Catholic theology. That is, despite the acceptance of evolution in official teaching, the Magisterium has struggled to acknowledge that evolution removes the possibility of a literal Adam and Eve and an actual historical Fall that occurred in human history.⁶ As Piet

4. Ibid., 108.

5. See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

6. Acceptance of evolution in official Roman Catholic teaching can be found in various documents and comments from recent popes and other officials. Of particular note is the International Theological Commission's 2004 document, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*. Yet official teachings on the doctrine of original sin and sexual ethics,

Schoonenberg so eloquently put it, in traditional Christian theological anthropology “there would seem to have been a higher form of humanity at the wrong end of man’s evolution.”⁷ This lack of clarification has serious implications for Church understandings of sexuality because Magisterial sexual ethics, particularly since Pope John Paul II, continue to use Adam and Eve and the story of the Fall as exemplars of gender and sexual norms.⁸

The first key insight that we can draw from Berry concerns his emphasis on story, which takes on much significance as we reflect on this problem. Berry is certainly referring, in part, to this evolution-original sin confusion when he observes that we are “in between stories right now.” He writes:

The deepest crises experienced by any society are those moments of change when the story becomes inadequate for meeting the survival demands of a present situation.... We are confounded at present because our historical situation has changed so profoundly. Our story, too, has changed. We no longer know its meaning or how to benefit from its guidance.⁹

For our purposes though, this confusion takes on even more significance as we reflect on the insights of contemporary theological analyses of Augustine. As sexual ethicists such as Margaret Farley emphasize, in Christian theology since Augustine, the human experience of sexual desire, lust and concupiscence is directly related to the Fall of humankind.¹⁰ Peter Brown paraphrases Augustine’s connection between original sin and sexual desire as follows: “The

as evident in sources such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* continue to talk about Adam and Eve and the Fall as real events in history.

7. As quoted in Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Development, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 135.
8. See, for example, John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997); John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2013).
9. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), xi.
10. Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum International, 2006), 41.

Christian married couple must ‘descend with a certain sadness’ to that particular task: for in the act of married intercourse itself, their very bodies spoke to them of Adam’s fall.¹¹

Despite a multitude of innovative, non-literal theological reinterpretations of original sin, despite official Roman Catholic endorsements of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, despite the fact that recent popes themselves have demonstrated an awareness that Adam and Eve are “mythological” and “symbolic figures,” official teachings on sex and gender, as well as teachings on original sin, continue to be based on a literal appeal to Adam and Eve and a natural law tradition based on fixed, immutable, ontological categories.¹² I would suggest that, to one degree or another, a similar tendency exists in almost all Christian traditions.

Berry’s seemingly simple emphasis on the importance of story shines a light on a deep problem in Christian theology. That is, we have no functional cosmology when it comes to reconciling our contemporary scientific understanding of cosmic and human origins with the dimension of sin and suffering that exists in the world. Moreover, we have no functional cosmology with regards to understanding the role of human sexuality in that story. Even while

11. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 426-427.

12. For a good overview of contemporary understandings of the doctrine of original sin, see Tatha Wiley’s *Original Sin*. On the issue of biblical interpretation, many sexual ethicists have pointed out that while Roman Catholic teaching has embraced critical historical methods overall, the Magisterium goes against its own understanding of the Bible when it makes literal appeals to certain passages to uphold teachings on sexuality. Meanwhile, recent popes have acknowledged that the Genesis story uses “symbolic language” to convey our human origins, but this further confuses the issue when it comes to constructing a “functional cosmology,” to use Berry’s term. When affirming traditional heterosexual marriage, for example, John Paul II refers to Adam and Eve as real people in history that convey God’s intended model for human sexuality. Consider section 390 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “The account of the fall in Genesis 3 uses figurative language, but affirms a primeval event, a deed that took place at the *beginning of the history of man*.” (Italics in original) How one is to square this historical understanding with the scientific account of human origins affirmed in documents such as *Communion and Stewardship* is left entirely unclear.

recent Roman Catholic and other Christian traditions attempt positive articulations of sexuality—such as the “theology of the body” expressed by John Paul II—there is still the *story* of the Fall, and a *dis*-functional cosmology that implies that sexual desire is an ontologically negative force that was introduced into creation as a divine punishment for sin, a punishment which is then passed on to our children through sexual intercourse. Amongst other problems, the story does not square with our evolutionary understanding of human origins. A new story for sexuality is needed.

Creative Energy

Another central insight in Berry’s work is the concept of “creative energy” and his sense that the universe is permeated with powerful energy forces that propel the unfolding of creation. Humans have traditionally participated in this creative energy by communing with the natural world through ritual and celebration. Activities like this created “an abundance of energy” flowing through the human being, giving ultimate meaning for the individual and also fueling the development of culture and civilization.¹³

This way of connecting with Earth was, to a large extent, a phenomenon of indigenous traditions and classical civilizations occurring in the early emergence of human cultures that lived within a consciousness of a spatial, seasonal, and ever-renewing cosmos. But a different consciousness emerged in Western civilization leading to a view of creation as time-developmental. In this mode, “the true reality of things and even the universal and liberating goal of human striving came to be seen as a development within the history process.”¹⁴ Thus the goal of spirituality shifted to a sense of redemption in a future-paradise, and the summoning of creative energies, as indigenous peoples had done, no longer satisfied the needs of an emergent technological civilization. The resulting sense of “alienation” of which Berry writes, I suggest, offers a more appropriate

13. Readers of Berry’s work are aware that he often lists examples of indigenous rituals; yet note that not once does he mention a sexual ritual.

14. Thomas Berry, “Creative Energy,” in *Riverdale Papers* I, 4.

contemporary understanding of a so-called “original sin” or “Fall.”¹⁵

For Berry, this shift became particularly troublesome when Earth’s status and fate was downgraded as humanity focused on its own salvation independent of the natural world. This emphasis on a future paradisiacal orientation created a human-earth split in Western civilization. As Berry puts it:

Not only are the deeper realms of humanity’s own being rejected, not only is the subjective communion with the earth stifled, but there is also a neglect of the all-numinous presence. We no longer experience the renewal of psychic energy which formerly was experienced within this presence of the sacred. The primary community of the divine, the natural and the human is shattered. This supreme source of energy is lost.¹⁶

This change in human consciousness is not a permanent alteration of our nature, however, since “these energies remain available and as potent as ever. We have simply lost the capacity for absorbing them.”¹⁷ Thus for Berry, one of the fundamental tasks of spirituality, of a functional cosmology, is to foster a proper relationship between human and Earth by re-cultivating the human experience of, and connection to, creative energy. This requires an integration of both the spatial and temporal realities of human experience. As Berry says “One of the great needs is to slow down the sequence of time changes by an increase in spatial awareness.”¹⁸ Elsewhere he writes, “The main function of contemporary spirituality is to create this interior paradisiacal space, in which we can breathe the refreshing air of eternity and thus save ourselves from suffocation in time.”¹⁹

A subtle connection to sexuality, and more broadly, love, begins to emerge when Berry presents the Universe Story as a continuous development of attraction. “The gravitation that pervades the universe, holds it together, and causes each tiniest particle to attract and

15. See Thomas Berry, “Alienation,” in *Riverdale Papers II*.

16. Berry, *Creative Energy*, 6.

17. *Ibid.*, 6-7.

18. *Ibid.*, 9.

19. Berry, *Alienation*, 10.

be attracted to every other particle, involves an awareness, an inner communication, an intercommunion.”²⁰ Thus the gravitation that brings atoms together, and planets together functions as a “remarkable symbol of love attraction and communion in the human order.”²¹ Building on Berry’s insights, Brian Swimme explains in a recent interview that it is useful to think of “love” as a word that refers to the whole cosmological dimension of attraction. Love and allurements brought about the complexity of creation as we know it through the force of attraction, even to the point of human beings discovering their very origin and the role of attraction in the emergence of life. That is, in Swimme’s words, “We are the place in which the original primal love of the universe is aware of itself and we are aware of that every time we fall in love.”²² When we fall in love, and/or feel sexual attraction, we are experiencing the primal love of the cosmos, which is yearning to become in us *human* love. This is significant because “as the human species learns to embody love, the entire planet goes through a fundamental transformation because... human presence now permeates all of the species of life.”²³ The way in which humans express love—of which sexuality is a major dimension—is shaping the evolutionary outcome of the planet.

Berry’s concept of creative energy offers the first key aspect of what we might call an ecological sexual anthropology. First and foremost, it implies that human sexuality, when considered within the functional cosmology of the Universe Story, is fundamentally and ontologically good. To experience sexual desire is to experience a yearning for intimacy that is the human expression of the same cosmic intimacy that holds the universe together, and guided its creation in the first place. This certainly seems logical with respect to sexuality in its *procreative* dimension. That is, engaging in sexual intercourse often quite literally creates new life. But I believe that it also implies that sexuality, in its unitive dimension, is a good, or an

20. Berry, *Creative Energy*, 11.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Chip August, “Love in the Cosmos—Interview with Brian Swimme,” in *Sex, Love and Intimacy Podcast* (Personal Life Media, 2011), <http://podcasts.personallifemedia.com/podcasts/222-sex-love-and-intimacy/episodes/3588-brian-swimme-love>.

23. *Ibid.*

end in and of itself because it is an expression of the universe's own desire for intimacy. The *unitive* dimension of sexuality is not just an add-on bonus to what is an otherwise procreative activity.

Indeed, recent new voices of sexual ethics have called into question traditional assumptions about the centrality of procreation to sexuality. From Todd Salzman's and Michael Lawler's critique of the Roman Catholic demand of openness to procreation, to Christine Gudorf's claim that "cultural procreationism" reduces the complexity of human sexual expression to genital sex and obscures larger issues of sexual exploitation, there is a movement in Christian sexual ethics to affirm the intrinsic value of the non-procreative dimensions of sexuality; and I suggest that Berry's notion of creative energy offers a way of anchoring this movement in a functional theological anthropology.²⁴

Another aspect of creative energy concerns the rediscovery of spatial awareness and the "all-pervasive numinous." There is much literature—both scholarly and personal-anecdotal—about sexual experience as spiritual awakening. Often these descriptions sound very much like Berry's account of, for example, the state achieved by indigenous peoples through cosmic ritual. In Berry's terms, sexual ecstasy might be thought of as a form of spatial awareness. For example, in Margot Anand's widely read *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy*, she describes a sexual moment with her partner as follows:

Suddenly we both seemed to be floating in an unbounded space filled with warmth and light. The boundaries between our bodies dissolved and, along with them, the distinctions between man and woman. We were one. The experience became timeless, and we seemed to remain like this forever. There was no need to have an orgasm. There was no need even to "make love." There was nothing to do, nothing to achieve. We were in ecstasy.²⁵

Peak sexual states are also often described as a feeling of unity with

24. See Salzman & Lawler, *The Sexual Person*; Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*.

25. Margot Anand, *The Art of Sexual Ecstasy: The Path of Sacred Sexuality for Western Lovers* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1989), 2-3.

all of creation. Scholar Georg Feuerstein has uncovered a common theme of “erotic spirituality” in all religious traditions whereby sexuality is seen as a transformative vehicle for spiritual growth that always involves an element of deeper awareness of the body and the natural world. Sounding in many ways like Berry, he writes:

Sacred Sexuality is about love—not merely the positive feeling between intimates but an overwhelming reverence for all embodied life on whatever level of existence. Through sacred sexuality, we directly participate in the vastness of being—the mountains, rivers, and animals of the earth, the planets and the stars, and our next-door neighbors.²⁶

Berry adds yet another dimension to this sense of ecstasy when he states that we cannot properly understand ourselves as humans until we see ourselves “not as a mechanistic function of matter but as the ecstasy of the earth.”²⁷ In other words, as that being in whom the universe comes to a special mode of self-reflective consciousness. Our experience of ecstasy, including sexual ecstasy, is also the universe itself experiencing the pleasurable sensations of beauty and life through the complexity of the human.

Most people do not have access to the kinds of ritual experiences Berry discusses with respect to indigenous traditions, but most people do have their sexuality as a way to experience creative energy. For Berry, we *must* have some way of rediscovering and harnessing this creative energy to solve the ecological crisis. In one very interesting passage, Berry writes:

For the will to succeed in this task of shaping the future with the ease and excitement, the human satisfaction, the cultural achievement and human magnificence that is indicated, something more than the will of the phenomenal ego must be functioning. The deeper self of man, *the entire libido* must be func-

26. Georg Feuerstein, *Sacred Sexuality: The Erotic Spirit in the World's Great Religions* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2003), xi.

27. Thomas Berry, “Cosmic Person and the Future of Man,” in *Riverdale Papers* I, 7.

tioning. The individual will can function in this capacity only through its union with the human community.”²⁸

Note that the Oxford dictionary defines “libido” as (i) sexual desire, (ii) the energy of the sexual drive as a component of the life instinct. Even if Berry only means the latter, it is still a distinctly sexual word to use.

Once again, the radical nature of this idea can only be appreciated when we contrast it with the sexual component of traditional theological anthropology. In the Augustinian tradition of original sin, sexuality is ontologically negative. To experience sexual desire is to experience our fallen nature. In this story, we were once in control of these passions, but then God punished us, and one of those punishments was the experience of lust. But Berry’s cosmology suggests that sexual desire is not the result of a divine punishment in response to a catastrophic mistake in human history, but a human expression of a creative energy that is very much in harmony with the divine creative force.

Some Ethical Implications

I have been suggesting that the first and most basic task in developing a new sexual anthropology from Berry’s telling of the Universe Story, is to make this shift from a negative view of sexual desire to a positive one, and to do this by situating human sexuality within a larger cosmological context. But this is just the starting point for a much larger project. Further development of this sexual anthropology will draw on other concepts from Berry’s thought to work out the content of ethical guidelines. A positive understanding of human sexual desire does not mean that any and all expressions of sexuality are positive or morally good. There is much truth to Augustinian concerns about the destructive power of sexuality. There is also much reason to link that destructive capacity of sexuality to a sense of a Fall, a loss of innocence, or a kind of alienation that cycles downward into destruction. After all, we are the most vulner-

28. Thomas Berry, “The Dynamics of the Future,” in *Riverdale Papers I*, 16 (italics added).

able in our sexual dimension, and damaging the sexuality of others is one of the most extreme forms of violence humans can inflict upon one another. Much like the imagery of original sin, sexual damage is indeed passed on to future generations.

Berry's three "primordial intentions" or "values of the Earth process"—differentiation, subjectivity and communion—offer another framework for developing the ethics of an ecological sexual anthropology. Berry talks about differentiation and the unfolding of variety and diversity at every level of the cosmos, from atomic structures to plants, animals and then to humans where the diversity is more extensive than any other known reality. This law of differentiation represents the "first fundamental value...the inherent indestructible value of the individual."²⁹ Yet Berry also emphasizes that the difficulty is that "there is no absolute model for the individual."³⁰ One's differentiation is in constant creative tension with various interior and exterior forces. In each historical age and cultural form, a new reality must be created and "there is no adequate model.... At each moment we must simply be what we are...and open into a larger life."³¹ While traditional theological anthropologies are premised upon universal and static notions of personhood, gender, and sexual orientation, Berry gives a dynamic, multivalent view of the human being shaping its own identity in constant creative tension with its surrounding environment.

The second primordial intention of the Earth process is subjectivity and interiority. Each being has its own interior reality and its own numinous aspect. "To deprive any being of this sacred quality," he writes, "is to disrupt the total order of the universe. Reverence will be total or it will not be at all."³² And the third value of the New Story is intercommunion. Just as the Earth process is marked by the ongoing differentiation of beings, and the increase of subjectivity, it is also marked by attraction and the yearning for communion: "Increased capacity for differentiation is inseparable from

29. Thomas Berry, "The New Story," in *Riverdale Papers* V, 17.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 16-17.

32. *Ibid.*, 17.

this capacity for communion.”³³ Berry also says the communion that occurs when the universe becomes aware of itself through human consciousness reaches a completion point through the “communion attained in the affective and in the aesthetic experience...of itself in its human expression.”³⁴ Considering the sensual connotation of words such as “affective” and “aesthetic,” it is not too much of a stretch, I believe, to say that Berry is implying that human intimacy, including sexual intimacy and the experience of the erotic, is a kind of completion point of the universe’s own yearning for communion.

What is particularly interesting about Berry’s notion of differentiation is that it is in line with recent movements in marital and sexual therapy. Psychologist and sexual therapist David Schnarch, who challenged conventional models of therapy in the 1990’s, has redirected the focus of marital and sexual therapy toward the same concept of differentiation. Other contemporary therapists such as Esther Perel echo Schnarch’s emphasis on differentiation as the key to both successful committed relationships as well as long-term sexual passion. Only when each partner is able to continue his or her spiritual growth towards greater differentiation and become “self-validated” in their own sexuality are they capable of true intersubjectivity and communion.³⁵ In other words, humans are no different than all of the other species in the sense that we need ongoing differentiation and evolving development to be able to then express communion and sexual intimacy effectively.

Yet the emphasis on subjectivity also implies an ethic that highlights the other’s subjectivity as a sacred quality, that one’s sexuality is itself a divine mode of presence, the violating of which constitutes a grave sin. Again, this connects with recent developments in sexual ethics that focus not on the ontological, timeless meaning of a sexual *act*, but considers the context of the lived experience, the personal meaning and the particular people involved in a sexual

33. Ibid., 19

34. Thomas Berry, “The American College in the Ecological Age,” in *Riverdale Papers* VII, 26.

35. See David Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage: Keeping Love and Intimacy Alive in Committed Relationships* (New York: Henry Hold & Company, 1997); Esther Perel, *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

act. Meanwhile the focus on differentiation privileges the diversity of lived experience. As Berry writes, “Each human being has such a unique identity that each person seems almost to constitute a different species.”³⁶ If this is true, and if sexuality is central to our personhood as Berry argues, then the New Story implies that the moral condemnation of those with “alternative” forms of sexual expression is perhaps one of the most egregious sins of all.

Evolving Sexualities

A final dimension of Berry’s thought to be developed in an ecological sexual anthropology concerns the evolving nature of reality itself and how Berry’s cosmology challenges the static model of natural law and/or any theory of sexuality that presupposes any kind of fixed, unchanging understanding of human sexuality. As Michael Foucault demonstrated, sexuality is not an ahistorical constant.³⁷ Berry’s sense that there “is no absolute model for the individual” has enormous sexual implications and suggests that human sexuality itself is changing as humans evolve and shape its meaning. While Berry never openly challenged the natural law tradition explicitly, he did discuss the magnitude of the transition occurring as we evolve beyond “medieval” forms of thought:

The great need of contemporary Christianity is to relinquish all medieval forms of expression.... Christians of our times still insist on external imitation of what is no longer a source of life.... Christians become the worst enemies of Christianity. In this situation we cannot live our own lives but must relive the medieval lives of our predecessors. We cannot think our own thoughts but must rethink theirs. We cannot have any new experiences of life but must repeat the medieval experience. In this way the finest spirituality becomes an oppressive ma-

36. Thomas Berry, “Perspectives on Creativity: Openness to a Free Future,” in *Riverdale Papers* VIII, 21.

37. See: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

teriality. What was dynamic becomes static, what was helpful becomes a hindrance.³⁸

As many theological critiques of traditional sexual ethics have emphasized, it is most notably in the realm of sexuality that the traditional churches remain gripped by “medieval forms of expression.” Berry writes: “No longer do we consider things as fixed in their structure. We speak now in developmental terms.”³⁹ He goes on to warn that the acceptance of reality as an evolving process is perhaps the most critical aspect of entering into the Ecozoic era. We have moved from talking about cosmos to cosmogenesis, from fixed species to biogenesis, from humankind as a determined reality to anthropogenesis. Arguably, it is in these reflections on the nature of change itself, that Berry offers his most provocative insights. Again, he does not acknowledge sexuality as a subject, but the implications for sexual ethics are profound.

A New Story, A New Dialogue

Margaret Farley has observed that our culture tends to create one of two extremes with regards to sexuality. Traditional religious approaches place excessive importance on sexual morality, whereby everything sexual is either “moral” or “immoral,” and “morality” effectively becomes nothing more than *sexual* morality. But another extreme, often found in liberal thinking, tends to see the sexual sphere as exclusively private and isolated from the rest of human life. Reiterating the feminist assertion that the “personal is political,” Farley affirms, “What happens in the sexual sphere of human life is not isolated from what happens in other spheres—whether familial, religious, social, political, or economic.”⁴⁰ I believe that this new emphasis in sexual ethics is the opening for a dialogue between sexuality and the new cosmology; a dialogue that corrects a missing link in Berry’s thought but that also expands the context of sexuality to go even further beyond familial, religious, social, political, and

38. Thomas Berry, “Creative Revolution,” in *Riverdale Papers* V, 11.

39. Thomas Berry, “Threshold of the Modern World,” in *Riverdale Papers* II, 2.

40. Farley, xi.

economic spheres, to include the ecological and cosmological.

As we have seen, Berry offers a vision of a functional cosmology that creates a new context for understanding sexuality in a way that integrates the human experience of sexuality within larger ecological and cosmic spheres. It is cosmological because Berry's linking of love and attraction with the larger cosmic forces of allurements allows for a view of sexual desire that celebrates the erotic as a good, whereas traditional theological anthropology has characterized it as the flawed result of a punishment. The vision is ecological because it suggests a sexual moral agent that exists in a creative tension with not only other people, but also the natural world. While we require differentiation and autonomy, we also require communion and must respect the subjectivity of the other's sexuality. Embedded within this vision is an ethical system to be developed that both draws upon and expands the conversation already occurring among the new voices of sexual ethics.