

BOOK REVIEW

Alchemy of Love: Sexuality & the Spiritual Life. Edited by Mateus Soares de Azevedo. Taos, NM: Sophia Perennis, 2020, PP. 154.

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It is readily becoming apparent that ‘progressive’ attempts to sever the sacred from love and sexuality has led to calamitous consequences for human relationships. How has this happened? Needless to say, the eclipse of humanity’s integral connection to the Spirit has not occurred overnight or in a vacuum; the catalyst was the gradual secularization brought about by the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment; a development that is rapidly reaching its consummation.

The emergence of modern psychology, especially through the writings of Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), grew out of this historical trajectory to which it remains faithful in its myopic worldview. Freud is often recognized as a precursor to the *sexual revolution* of the 1960s counter-culture, and it is well known that human sexuality held a central place in his thought. His view of *homo naturalis* is not that of a liberated human being but, rather, a caricature of fallen or *samsaric* humanity that has lost its connection to the Divine. Freud’s theories not only fueled the *Weltanschauung* of the modern world but have bequeathed to us a fragmented and inverted image of the human state. These ideas have become so ubiquitous in our profane *Zeitgeist* that they are barely questioned.

At first glimpse, human love, sexuality and spirituality might seem disparate to each other; however, in this timely anthology, these themes all converge and are shown to be inseparable. This is evidenced by the contrast between the flesh and the spirit that often epitomizes an unreflecting dualism; yet in metaphysics, human love and sexuality are spiritualized and therefore embody a nondual vision of life. The purpose of this anthology is to rediscover these profound and forgotten dimensions of physical love with reference to the universal and timeless wisdom of the perennial philosophy.

In what is a unique work, *Alchemy of Love* explores the metaphysical foundations of sexuality in a way that we rarely see these days. In it we find the central exponents of the perennial philosophy—such as Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), Titus Burckhardt (1908–1984), Jean Hanin (1917–2012) and William Stoddart (b. 1925)—displaying their perspicacious insights on this subject. We are also introduced to a newer generation of writers such as Mahmoud Bina, Alireza K. Ziarani and Mateus Soares de Azevedo, who are also grounded in the great spiritual traditions of the world.

According to metaphysics, sexuality has two main functions: procreation and the symbolic union of the two sexes. Erotic love includes the capacity to raise us, so to speak, above ourselves and beyond the narrow confines of the empirical ego. Through the erotic embrace between man and woman, as envisaged esoterically, our lost primordial unity can thereby be regained.

Due to humanity's fallen or *samsaric* consciousness, humanity today endeavors to find completion in various pursuits (including sex) but usually to no avail. In pursuing sexual ecstasy, we unknowingly seek a deeper wholeness, not realizing that it cannot be found in a merely carnal activity but only in recovering our lost androgynous state, which Plato so poignantly describes in *The Symposium*.

Our task is to realize what the masculine and feminine are called to be in principle so that we can live this archetypal reality through recognizing the Divine qualities in each sex. In the spiritual dark age in which we currently find ourselves, the lower dimensions of the soul overwhelmingly determine the formation of a false sense of personal identity. Our true self transcends the psychophysical order which, nevertheless, remains subsumed in the Spirit. We are reminded of that venerated passage in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* which states that what we truly seek in the other, whether male or female, is the Divine, which is none other than our own immanent, yet transpersonal, center:

It is not for the love of the husband that he is loved, but for love of *Atma* [the Self] which is in him; and it is not for love of the wife that she is loved, but for the love of *Atma* which is in her.... (p. 48)

What modern psychology does not recognize is that the primordial androgyne, or our fundamental human identity, cannot be restored by submitting to one's lower nature or vices or by doing away with traditional morality. The "science of the soul," or the perennial psychology as advocated in all religions, does not denigrate the human aspect of love and sexuality, nor does it take a prudish stance as is often mistakenly believed; rather, it views integral sexuality as the communion of human beings with spiritual reality. As Schuon states: "In primordial man, sexual ecstasy coincides with spiritual ecstasy, it transmits to man an experience of mystical union, a 'remembrance' of the divine Love of which human love is a distant reflection" (p. 7).

The erotic embrace symbolizes a consecrated act that is, as Schuon notes, "naturally supernatural." Within esoterism or the inner dimension of religion, noble pleasure is not associated with any kind of moral transgression, as this union is conducive to our remembrance of the Divine. What the religions regard as sinful is not sexual pleasure as such, but the selfish pursuit of pleasure without awareness of the sacred. In this sense, we can see how the love that is experienced between human beings is a remote and somewhat ambiguous reflection of Divine Love. Through the spiritual ecstasy that is shared in the mystical union of a man and a woman coming together, the evocation of such love can be powerfully awakened.

To ignore one of the two poles, or to confuse them, would be a fundamental subversion of the Divine order. These poles of cosmic manifestation are known in Hindu metaphysics as *purusha* and *prakriti* or, in Taoism, as *yin-yang*, the creative interplay of the masculine and feminine inherent in all phenomena. While each human being has a distinct sexual identity, this does not mean that male and female can be arbitrarily merged without reference to a transcendent principle, with a view to artificially recreating an androgynous state. Stoddart stresses that “The masculine and the feminine have their origin in God Himself” (p. 31), but also adds that “God is above and beyond sex: He is neither masculine nor feminine” (p. 38).

The traditional understanding of the androgyne confirms that, originally, a human being was neither male nor female, but comprised of both as an archetypal reality found *in divinis*—“There is neither male nor female” (Galatians 3:28) and “Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 11:11) The Book of Genesis (1:27) states: “So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” The *Midrash* clarifies this as follows: “When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the first man, He created him androgynous.” (Genesis Rabbah 8:1) The Divine pairing of male and female is also found in the Koran: “Glory to God, Who created in pairs all things” (36:36) and “We have created you in pairs.” (78:8)

Our essential humanity as *anthropos* has its origins in Spirit, prior to the ontological rupture that divided the sexes in the realm of duality. In the same way that our true self can never be lost, the primordial androgyne inherent in each one of us will always remain innate to our true sense of being.

The sapiential traditions, with their metaphysical approach to human sexuality, convey—in their own unique languages—the essence of love in its highest expression. Again, the masculine and feminine poles are integral to the manifestation of the cosmos. To return to our fundamental identity requires embracing these binaries, not suppressing them. As Hani reminds us: “The union of man and woman, when restored to its original integrity, provides the most common spiritual way of re-ascending to God.” (p. 126)

This anthology comprises a wonderful collection of illuminating essays by perennialist writers that address an often-misunderstood and contentious dimension of human nature. Those seeking a more profound vision of human sexuality will find here the immutable principles necessary to discern this mystery without, of course, exhausting it. What truly distinguishes this work is its ability to create new vistas in our understanding of eroticism as a means of partaking in spiritual reality.

“When you make the two one ... and if you make the masculine and feminine into one ... then you will enter the Kingdom.” *Gospel of Thomas* (on p. 114)