The Concept of Person and the Concept of Sexuality in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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I. The Concept of Person

1. The Concept of Person in Judaism
(Prof. Dr. Aryeh Botwinick)

In Jewish Scripture, as well as rabbinical literature, and later philosophy, human nature is considered in the encounter with and in distinction from God. The concept of person can be explored through the concept of God, whose portrayal in religious texts is a reflection of human nature and self-image. The Jewish understanding of person is informed by the contrast between human life before and after the Fall. According to Moses Maimonides, the Fall replaced people's previous perfect understanding of true and false with an understanding of good and evil. The existence of the entire field of ethics with its imprecision and fallibility is thus symptomatic of the fallen state of humanity. As for the relation to adherents of other faiths, the Hebrew Bible (as well as the New Testament) often tries to foster sympathy with outsiders. In Jewish law, basic relations to other humans are governed by the Noahide laws.

The creation account in Genesis 1 inserts the reader in the middle of a pre-existing creation story, painting a sober image of personhood with imperfection at its center. It sums up the human condition as working to perfect an imperfect universe but never being able to complete that task. According to G. Tucker, Adam and Eve embody the centrality of new beginnings in human lives. In keeping with the constant incompleteness and insecurity of human life, monotheism keeps our greatest achievements in perspective as relative and fluid by constantly showing us our distance from perfection. When the Bible speaks of God as a person, its meaning is metaphorical in that it likens Him to human beings.

2. The Concept of Person in Christianity
(Prof. Dr. Edward Alam)

While anthropology is strictly the science of man, a discussion of the concept of person may include non-human entities. A significant part of early Christian theological debate centered around the idea of personhood in God, both in the Trinitarian controversy around the nature and relationship of the three divine persons and in the Christological controversy about the

relation between the divine and human nature in the person of Christ. These debates directly affected the Christian idea of the afterlife, as the nature of God and especially the dual nature of Christ are directly related to the concept of salvation.

In the Middle Ages, Aristotelian philosophy exerted a significant influence on Christian thinking about personhood and the soul. Within that tradition, Thomas Aquinas added substantially to the understanding of person in the context of Christian dogma with his elaborate conception of *analogia entis*. The ontological understanding of relation in the Arabic commentaries on Aristotle and later in Thomas Aquinas allowed an ontological concept of person as a human being in relation. This idea was later challenged by 17th century philosophy, which led to the emancipation of the concept of person from theology. However, this emancipation was seen as not only a liberation, but also, by some, as an impoverishment, so that the earlier concept of "person in relation" returned in the philosophical personalism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Personalism regards person as a relative and fluid concept and treats relatedness to other persons as something foundational to the idea of personhood. Christian personalism in particular also connects this notion with the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

If intellectual abilities are a part of the concept of person, this raises questions about small children or people with intellectual disabilities. However, in the Christian understanding, they are just as infinitely inferior to God as every other person, and must therefore be accorded the same amount of respect. Persons and their expressions can also be regarded as revelations or reminders of God's truth.

3. The Concept of Person in Islam
(Prof. Dr. Peter G. Riddell)

Although not defined in its core teachings, the concept of person is foundational in Islam because the role of Islamic beliefs and practices lies in shaping the lives of persons on all levels. Relevant Qur'ānic terms include *al-nās*, a collective term meaning "people", *nafs*, referring to an individual soul or living person, and *rajul*, "man". In eschatological contexts, the term *wajh* is also relevant, meaning the person in its entirety; this allows a comparison to the Christian discussion around the *prosopa / wujūh* of the Trinity.

In the traditionalist strand of Islamic theological thinking, the focus is on the person as a creature, whose primary purpose is to serve God in fulfilling their pre-ordained fate and

actions. "Person" is understood as a *created* person, meaning also that God is not a person. Relevant in this respect is also al-Ṭabarī's distinction of three types of *nafs* (soul) in scripture: The soul which commands towards evil, the soul in confusion, and the soul at peace, which is the soul of the believer. In more rationalist schools of thought, much more emphasis is placed on personal freedom, expressed in the individual person's relationship with God and with the rest of mankind. Man's purpose lies in exercising that freedom in worship and in guardianship over creation. In Sufism, on the other hand, created persons are seen as essentially one with their creator, so that free will is a non-issue. On certain contemporary issues, the traditionalist and rationalist scholars have similar views: In both cases, contraception is seen as permissible for medical reasons, otherwise *makrūh*, but not *ḥarām*; while abortion is permissible before the 120th day of pregnancy, at which point, as a Qur'ānic verse suggests, the soul is breathed into the fetus and abortion becomes unacceptable. On cloning, the traditionalists call for an absolute prohibition, whereas more liberal scholars withhold judgment until a better understanding of the facts is gained. Qur'ānic mentions of punishments such as being turned into a pig or a monkey suggest that personhood is forfeited by certain transgressions. Similarly, members of other nations or religions are sometimes compared to animals. Comparisons to the views of the two other monotheistic religions on the status of persons from other faiths can be drawn.

II. The Concept of Sexuality
1. The Concept of Sexuality in Judaism
(Prof. Dr. Sarah Imhoff)

On this topic as on many others in the Jewish tradition, there have long been multiple approaches and interpretations, although multiplicity and disagreement does not necessarily involve discord. The descriptions of sexuality in the Hebrew Bible are very diverse, although one should keep in mind that mere inclusion in the Biblical text does not imply endorsement or approval from the point of view of Jewish law. Although there are widely shared Jewish approaches, there is no clear statement on sexual morality.

While Talmudic texts are written by and for men, and men do have a privileged position in marital law, there are also issues on which the Talmud grants more rights to women than was usual at the time, such as the rights of rape victims. The Talmud recognises two kinds of intersex or non-binary people (the *androgynos* with both kinds of genitalia and the *tumtum* with no recognisable sex) whose gender cannot be determined and whose legal rights and obligations are discussed at length. While Talmudic gender diversity does not map directly onto modern identities, it does provide resources for affirming contemporary transgender and non-binary identities, even though LGBT people are still marginalised in many Jewish communities.

Regarding relationships, the Biblical commandment to "be fruitful and multiply" constitutes a clear validation of heterosexual procreative sex, but whether other sexual practices are permissible is unclear from the Biblical texts. In most cases, different Talmudic interpreters have opposite answers. In the Hassidic tradition, the discussion of sexual practices tends to be shaped by the question whether male seed is "wasted", i.e. prevented from being used in procreation. This emphasis on male seed stands in contrast to the Qur'ānic understanding of procreation as a "mixture" of male and female semen, although Jewish writings also assume both partners' mental state during conception to influence their offspring. The common contemporary claim that Judaism, unlike other religions, is sex-positive, is therefore a selective reading. However, even the least permissive texts do not portray sexuality as inherently bad or connected to original sin, in contrast with much of the Christian tradition.

2. The Concept of Sexuality in Christianity
(Prof. Dr. Heike Walz)

Loth (1977) distinguishes four types of religious stances on sexuality: 1) Sexuality as the delight in creation; 2) the integrating type (sexuality as part of religion); 3) the disintegrating type (sexuality functionalised), 4) asexual religion. All four of these types can be found within Christianity. Moreover, with the worldwide spread of Christianity and larger numbers of Christians living in the global South, Europe is no longer as central to Christian discourse as it was in earlier centuries. Thus, a diverse range of concepts and viewpoints need to be considered when discussing the concept of sexuality in Christianity. There is widespread disagreement between denominations and between liberal and conservative strands of the same denomination, while on the other hand there are similarities between groups from different denominations and even religions.

Since the term "sexuality" is relatively new, there is a large gap between its modern understanding and what can be found in the Biblical texts. There is no abstract term for sexuality in either the Old or the New Testament. Rather, the word "to know somebody" is used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. The treatment of this topic in the Epistles of St. Paul is framed by an androcentric and anti-sexual interpretation of Genesis 1-3, for example by identifying Eve with sexuality and hence with sin (1 Tim 2, 18-25). The emphasis on abstinence in the New Testament may be partly related to the imminent eschatological expectation of the early Christian community, but is also due to Hellenistic influence. The Biblical counter paradigm to this is found in the Old Testament, most notably in the Song of Songs, where sexuality and spirituality are intimately connected. The anti-sexual tendencies of the Epistles find their theological and philosophical reflections in the works of theologians like Augustine who highlights the idea of original sin as transmitted by sexual intercourse or Thomas Aquinas who considers sexuality as sinful because it interferes with rationality. On the other hand, we find in mysticism a tradition of spiritualized sexuality as in the mysticism of the bride. Early Protestant movements rejected celibacy in favour of marriage as the ideal Christian life, which provides a point of commonality with the Jewish understanding of procreation as a duty. The Jewish tradition places much less emphasis on the connection of sexuality with sinfulness; if it is present at all, it is only in the weakened sense of carnality, imperfection, and sinfulness being the basic state of human beings. Some rabbinic texts go so far as to see asceticism as a temptation, since denying the pleasures of creation is sinful.

The idea of sexuality as a sin in Christianity led to intercultural clashes in the time of colonial mission as it was not understandable in cultures where a more cosmic understanding of sexuality was predominant. Today, we also find conflicts caused by a new understanding of sexual autonomy and woman's liberation, with feminist theology and queer theology being important to many current ecumenical conflicts. The intersectionality between gender and postcolonial discourses also plays an important role in this context: For example, some African Christians argue that after Europeans first imposed their heteronormative morals, they now want to impose the opposite.

3. The Concept of Sexuality in Islam
(Prof. Dr. Patrick Franke)

Historically, sexuality as a concept had no place in the Islamic tradition, but was a concept imported from Europe in the 20th century. However, issues that would today fall under the heading of sexuality were treated under various other headings within Islamic writings, such that the thematic field of sexuality in Islam comprises a vast number of concepts. Some pre-Islamic elements were integrated into Islamic sexual ethics, such as the inclusion of foster kinship in impediments to marriage, polygyny, sexual restrictions during pilgrimage, and both male and female circumcision. The latter were integrated in very different ways: Male circumcision is still a way to enter the community of believers, whereas female genital mutilation was a way to control and regulate female sexuality and was only common in some regions of the Islamic world, even before the struggle against it intensified in recent decades. New elements in the Meccan period included the rejection of sexual abstinence, the idea of love between spouses as a "sign of God" (Q 30:21), and the abhorrence of male homoerotic desire. In the Medinan period, a stronger focus was placed upon measures to ensure paternity. This period also saw the introduction of rules for female veiling and of asymmetric endogamy with Jews and Christians. During the time of ʿUmar bin al-Ḫaṭṭāb, the law was tightened further with regard to sexual offences.

In the first few centuries of the Islamic era, the emerging field of Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) further elaborated marriage and purity laws and introduced new categories in criminal law. Under the influence of the translation of Greek medical treatises, the subdiscipline of *ʿilm al-bāh* ("science of coitus") emerged, which held sexual activity to be necessary to preserve health. These originally medical treatises in later centuries, possibly under Indian influence,

acquired an erotological character, covering such subjects as female beauty, courtship, or sexual positions.

During the colonial and post-colonial age, European values influenced Islamic sexual ethics. This included the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of child marriages, the decriminalization of *zinā*, but also impulses from Victorian sexual ethics, including the denigration of homoeroticism (as opposed to the flourishing gay culture of the Islamic Middle Ages). In the 1990s and 2000s, there was a growing number of activist groups introducing / defending the idea of sexual autonomy. This modernisation has, however, been accompanied by defensive reactions, both by reactionary activist groups and by governments: since the 1970s, the penal codes of various countries have been Islamicised, and gender segregation, obligatory veiling, and child marriages have been (re-)introduced.

In general, sexuality is as much a social as a religious issue, although both these spheres have gone hand in hand throughout large parts of history. Because sexuality is very hard to regulate, attempts to regulate it often lead to double standards or to a gap between normative rules and actual practice.