Teaching and Talking about Our Sexuality: A Means of Combating HIV/AIDS
AGRIPPA G. KHATHIDE


Since the advent of HIV/AIDS the church has shown some reluctance to get involved in the debate about the epidemic and the fight against it. HIV/AIDS has been considered as God’s punishment for the immoral corruption of humankind, a judgmental attitude which one hopes is no longer prevalent. Events such as our workshops are both heart-warming and highly appreciated, especially when we consider the spiralling rate of the epidemic in the southern African region.

The opportunity to participate and contribute to the debate on the HIV/AIDS epidemic is a privilege and responsibility. As someone involved in the training of church leaders, I have in fact little choice. Unless there is a collective endeavour to combat HIV/AIDS, we face the prospect of the annihilation of the human race.

Breaking the conspiracy of silence
As HIV/AIDS is largely a human sexuality issue, it is urgent to look into our attitude towards sex. Unless this changes, our fight against HIV/AIDS will become increasingly difficult.

We often find that when we talk about sex in public, we are faced with comments like, “Don’t talk about sex, we are Christians” or “Don’t talk about sex, we are Africans.” If we are serious about fighting the epidemic, we need to tackle this conspiracy of silence firmly and resolutely.

At the moment, instead of acquiring skills in talking about sex, we resort to the easy way out like distributing condoms to children and adults alike without proper education in matters of sexuality. It is also true that when HIV/AIDS struck we panicked, and in the desperate process of trying to find a remedy we ended up sending messages we did not mean. Though every strategy can be recommended, flooding people with condoms, especially in South Africa, has not had much success because the number of people infected is going up, not down.

The church, as a body that claims to be the conscience of humanity and the custodian of moral values, needs to lead in the campaign to break the conspiracy of silence. But because of the history of silence on sexual matters, except to condemn, the church finds it difficult to open up.

Foster1 notes that when people turn to the church for direction in sexual matters, they are usually met with stony silence or a counsel of repression. He concludes that silence is no counsel and repression is bad counsel. And because we have categorized HIV/AIDS as punishment for sinful living, the church has further marginalized the “clientele” it is supposed to serve. In most African countries the issue of silence is compounded by both our cultural socialization and spiritual or theological perceptions. It is important, therefore, to focus on these two factors and see how they contribute to the silence on sexual matters.

The ambivalence of culture
As a transmitter of values and moral code, culture has undoubtedly played a significant role in ensuring that posterity knows what is acceptable and what is not. Contrary to the racist opinion that African people have always been promiscuous, their cultural signposts indicate that African people in general have been proud of their good moral behaviour. In South Africa, among the amaZulu – a people whose culture I am closely associated with – people know what is culturally acceptable as right. For example, a young woman who is discovered to have lost her virginity before the wedding is said to have caused ilhazo (shame) for her people.

To ensure that young girls kept their virginity, some clans among the amaZulu made virginity tests. In the modern-day culture of human rights such exercises are discouraged, but it is nevertheless important to acknowledge the significance of their background.
Another important cultural institution that helped in the teaching of sexual behaviour to young people was initiation schools. At separate schools young women and men were taught how to prepare for adult life, how to relate to people of the opposite sex and, in some tribes, how to have sex by simulation. Penetration was firmly forbidden until marriage.

When missionaries came to preach the gospel in Africa, they did away with many cultural institutions, most of which were good and helped to maintain the moral fibre of society. The problem was that missionaries did not come up with an effective replacement. Nothing was provided to fill the lacuna created in the process of Christianizing Africa.

But the flipside of the coin is that culture has fostered the conspiracy of silence. Generally, in most African cultures talking about sex in public is considered culturally taboo. If you do so, you are bound to be called names. Even those who try seriously to address sexual matters are shouted down. And it is worse if you are a church minister: ministers are expected to talk about heaven and God, and if they have to talk about sex it is in hushed tones behind closed doors. They are afraid that if the congregation or their superiors find them talking openly about sex they will be disciplined or suspended. Consequently, church ministers end up being simply agents of culture rather than ambassadors of the truth. The conspiracy of silence continues.

The challenge to break the silence about human sexuality needs to be faced if we are to succeed in talking about HIV/AIDS. Perhaps the best place to break that silence is in the home. Parents must feel free to talk openly about sex to their children and allow them to ask questions. Most parents have abdicated their responsibility to give sex education to their children, in the hope that schoolteachers and the mass media will fill the void. Nothing on earth can substitute for parental guidance. Before our children hear about sex anywhere else, they need to hear about it at home first.

But I suspect that the reason parents are ashamed to talk about sex to their children is because marital partners themselves are ashamed to talk about sex to one another. In marriage, many people are afraid to talk about their sexual problems openly because they do not want to hurt the other partner. Some secretly resolve to be involved extra-maritally. If nothing helps, they may end up divorcing their partners. Often, after the divorce, people talk about the real reason why they separated from their partner. We need to look sex in the eye and stop regarding it as an idol of some kind.

**Spiritual and/or theological constraints**

*The irrelevancy of traditional theology*

One of the problems of traditional Christian theology is that it was born in European settings of previous centuries. In the words of Mbiti, this is the challenge we must face as the axis of Christianity tilts southwards towards areas, situations, cultures, concerns, traditions, religions and problems which are largely different from those which precipitated the theological output in the West over the last five hundred years at least. There is a tendency for African theological students to have to concentrate on past problems of the European church. They have not been made to study how to resolve pressing problems facing the African continent. Because of this heavy Eurocentric slant in our theology, African problems are treated as if they were unimportant.

The concentration of theology on past debates and disputes makes the African theological student unable to address present problems facing the African church and the continent as a whole. In the back of our minds we still think, as the African church, that the solution to the HIV/AIDS debacle will come from the West. There is a general lack of capacity to address problems as we experience them today on the African continent. Perhaps the starting point would be to begin to prescribe to our students works by African authors. If there are none, it challenges us to begin to produce them. Our students need to have control over the context in which they live and hope to carry out their mission.

*The problem of after-life emphasis*

The tendency of Christian theology and the church as a whole to focus either on the past or life after death makes Christianity unable to grapple with problems of the present. Important
as it is to assure people of their salvation, it is theologically irresponsible to think of Christianity simply in other-worldly terms.

Since HIV/AIDS is currently decimating humanity, it is incumbent upon the church not to shirk its prophetic and pastoral responsibilities. The hope that the church should give is both for the present and the future.

**Dichotomizing reality**
The dichotomy of reality by traditional Christian theology does not contribute at all positively to the solution of HIV/AIDS and other African problems. The inclination to separate life into different categories, for example, creation and redemption, the spiritual and the profane, visible and invisible, temporal and eternal, body and spirit, makes it difficult for the church to engage the problems of human existence in a meaningful way. When it comes to the African context, Oduyoye rightly reminds us that spiritual needs are as important for the body as bodily needs are for the soul. Such an acknowledgment will help us understand the scourge of HIV/AIDS in a holistic manner. The issue affects and touches on all of life and any effective tackling of the problem needs to take this into consideration.

**Viewing the human body in a negative way**
Due to historical factors like the influence of ancient philosophy, which regarded the spirit as pure and all matter as evil, the church has been tentative in handling issues that affect the human body directly. As the church we seem to be lacking in theological capacity and skills in addressing problems of the body. When it comes to such problems, we often experience a spiritual inadequacy and consequent spiritual inadequacy and consequent But it needs to be said that Christianity has not always considered the body as the body. Thielicke says that the fundamental contribution of Christianity to anthropology is that it rejects the partition and stratification of a human person and, instead, teaches that a human being is a psychophysical unity, in which the body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19, 3:16ff.), and therefore loses that inferiority which attaches to it in the Hellenistic tradition. The fact that the Spirit of God can inhabit the human body as well as have a healing effect (Rom. 8:11) should have tremendous implications for Christian theology.

Perhaps, more than anything else, the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the pre-existent Word (John 1:1,14), should help us adequately to comprehend the unity of a human being. In the incarnation of Christ the dualism of the spiritual and the profane, spirit and body, is dealt a serious blow. Based on our understanding of the incarnation, Bosch believes that we have to turn our backs resolutely on our traditional dualistic thinking. It is, therefore, understandable that the human body is viewed positively in the holy scriptures. In the incarnation of Christ the body-life is affirmed.

**The demonizing of sex**
Perhaps the reason why the church finds it difficult to handle sex and sexuality-related issues is because we have considered sex as belonging to a domain outside the sovereignty of God. Though we may find it hard to admit, it is true that human beings, including the church, regard sex as belonging to the devil – something that is associated with darkness, evil and wickedness. The church seems to be comfortable with the fact that sex education is the responsibility of governments, schools and NGOs. Thus sex remains taboo for the church. Even our African cultures have contributed to the present state of affairs.

The demonizing of sex has a long history in the Christian church. The tragic separation of sexuality and spirituality can be traced back to some prominent theologians in church history. Augustine, for example, in The City of God views human sexuality in a negative way. He calls sex the “shame, which attends all sexual intercourse”, “evil of lust” (even in the marital bond), “sometimes the impulse is an unwanted intruder”. Augustine even suggests that Paul’s warning, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from fornication; that you know how to control your own body in holiness and honour, not with lustful passion, like the gentiles who do not know God” (1 Thess. 4:3-5), should be interpreted as meaning that a man who desires holiness “would prefer, if possible, to beget children without lust of this kind”.

To this day many Christians feel that their sexuality is nature’s strongest competitor for their loyalty to Christ, the reasoning being that a Christian cannot love both God and sex.
Smedes believes that such people allow their feelings to tell them that sexuality is not a sweet
gift of creation, but a bitter fruit of the fall. Such a view ignores the fact that biblical authors
affirm human sexuality and see sex and sexual pleasure in marriage as God’s gift to be
enjoyed.15

In our fight against HIV/AIDS it is critical to view human sexuality positively and thus allow the
light of scripture to shine upon the area of sex. Perhaps it will be helpful to avoid traditional
clichés like “sex is wrong”, “sex is sinful”, and “sex is bad”. Both abstinence16 and faithfulness
are positive messages for the human race. Thielicke17 points out that the “sexual nature of
man and woman does not allow human beings merely to follow impulse in blind, animal
fashion, if the urge is to be satisfied”. It is not as if human beings cannot control themselves
sexually. It is for this reason, among others, that we need a theologically sensitive
anthropology. The message of abstinence and faithfulness needs to be destigmatized. It is a
message that needs to be understood against the background of a desire to build human
character.

Suggestions

Demystifying sex
When it comes to sex many people are confused, confounded and inconsistent. We may be
sure that we know what is right or wrong about things people do with sex. But few of us are
really sure within ourselves about how we actually feel and how we ought to feel about the
sexuality that is woven into the texture of our very beings. Some culturally and theologically
conservative persons may secretly enjoy the sexual urges within themselves – some even
pastorally advise enjoying sex with their marital partners without openly admitting it. On the
other hand, the most liberated persons in a taboo-free age may still have residual feelings of
shame about their sexuality. Other people try outrightly to deny their sexuality. Human beings
carry within them a complex mixture of feelings about sex.

It is, therefore, imperative to demystify human sexuality. We need to lift the lid off it – the
blanket of mystery on sex and related issues needs to be removed once and for all. The
cultural and spiritual barriers prohibiting any discussion on sexuality must be destroyed.
Discussing sex, which is very much part of us, will go a long way in helping us grapple with
the scourge of HIV/AIDS in a meaningful way. Those who are infected and affected will
hopefully find it easier to talk about their status and feelings more openly.

Vernacularizing our message
HIV/AIDS has for a long time been associated with the West. Many Africans find it acceptable
to deal with sexual issues using a Western language, whether it is English, Portuguese or
French. Without trying to be overly subjective, I have found that using my mother tongue in
communicating a sex message, whether to young or old people, gets them to begin thinking
and participating vigorously on the subject. When we name sex-related objects by their
vernacular names – the penis, the vagina, intercourse – people tend to listen. It is true that
some spiritual and cultural bigots may categorize such an approach as vulgar and insulting,
but if we do not get people to listen, we need to resort to (theologically and culturally)
unorthodox methods that may be ecclesiastically and culturally frowned upon but biblically
inoffensive. The fact that Adam and Eve walked in unashamed nakedness in the garden of
Eden (or in the presence of God?) should be some relief to those who are afraid to talk about
sex openly. Explicitness is not necessarily sinful, as some may want us to believe. This will
hopefully open a way for husbands and wives, parents and children, and religious
communities to talk openly about sex.

Reaffirming sexual equality
Addressing students at Vista university in Soweto once, I was confronted by a female student
who said to me that she did not have a problem with Christ but she could not take the attitude
of the church towards women: she said that whenever preachers talk about adulterers they
actually refer to women. After giving it some thought, I had to agree that in fact she was right.

This has its origin in culture. In the many African cultures a man is not said to be committing
adultery when he is extra-maritally involved. Such behaviour is described in glorified terms
like isoka, monna ke selepe. Such an attitude gives men the freedom to move around and in
the process hurt people; if these men are HIV-positive, they spread the disease with cultural and spiritual licence.

The oppression of women in the area of sex has a long history. The story of the woman who was said to have been caught in the act of adultery (John 8:1-11) should make us wonder why she was brought alone to Jesus and not with the man she was caught with, according to the law of Moses (Lev. 20:10). The oppression of women is also seen in marriage. More specifically, oppression is seen in sex, where a woman is considered as an object with no sexual feelings of her own. Married women must be able to feel free to express themselves sexually.

**Theological training**

These reflections tell me that we cannot teach theology the way we have been doing up to now. Unless our own students are liberated from the fear and shame of talking openly about sex, they will not be able to deal with situations within their own lives and in the lives of the people they are supposed to serve in the ministry. Perhaps the key is for us as lecturers to allow ourselves to be human beings and act as vulnerable creatures before our students, for them to be able to identify with us and with people ravaged by sexual frustrations and HIV/AIDS. This means that we have to move away from the image of theology as exclusive and begin to be involved in interactive and integrated learning. The need for involvement of other experts (religious or secular) and of the social sciences cannot be over-emphasized. Rather than producing ivory-tower theoreticians, we should produce “home-grown” intellectuals who can think with their communities, in the midst of them and for them as well.

**Conclusion**

Teaching and talking about our sexuality is an explicit acknowledgment that, as much as we are spiritual people, we are equally sexual. Talking about sex need not lead to sexual corruption. It should be viewed as a mechanism for airing thoughts and feelings in the hope of creating an environment in which people can express their sexual feelings without experiencing guilt. The suppression of sexual feelings often leads to behaviour that is not in line with ecclesiastically accepted belief and practice. The need to break the silence around human sexuality and HIV/AIDS is long overdue and the best place to do so is with those who have the task of preaching the good news.

**Practical exercises**

- Using the HIV and AIDS Curriculum for Theological Institutions in Africa (unit 1), design a course on “Human Sexuality, Culture, HIV/AIDS and the Church”.
- Make a one-month preaching plan on how you will foster positive thinking towards sex that also breaks the silence.
- Student assignment: Use field-work to collect and compare the views of church people and society in general on human sexuality and HIV/AIDS.

**NOTES**

1. Richard J. Foster, Money, Sex & Power, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1985, p.120.
17. Thielicke, Theological Ethics, p.47. y pass the responsibility to other experts, whoever they may be.