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## Ellens' "The Spirituality of Sex" - Book Review

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*Spirituality of Sex* by J. Harold Ellens. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009. In the series Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality. Reviewed by Mark S. McLeod-Harrison

*The Spirituality of Sex* is part of a series on psychology, religion, and spirituality and hence takes a cross-disciplinary approach to a topic of central concern to everyone (although the author's audience is assumed to include only persons of heterosexual orientation). Unfortunately, much of the book is disappointing.

To begin, as with many crossdisciplinary works, what counts as evidence is not clear. There are, for example, a number of philosophical propositions put forward but little philosophical argument. For example, Ellens claims that spirituality and sexuality are same thing (p. xvii) but then provides different (even if closely related) definitions of them.

Human spirituality is best defined as our irrepressible hunger and quest for meaning in all aspects of life. Human sexuality is best defined as our irrepressible hunger and quest for union with other persons and the meaning of life found in the wholeness of complete fulfillment that such union brings. (xvi)

Perhaps spirituality and sexuality are the same thing, but that leans toward reducing spirituality (overall) to sexuality, something we should perhaps be leery of. The real problem, however, is that I found the book wanting in good philosophical argument for these kinds of claims.

More troubling is an apparent overall lack of empirical data or evidence to back up many of the broad psychological claims made. The closest the author comes to evidence for his claims are the occasional case studies from his own clinical practice. However, to draw the general conclusions from these singular studies seems simply to be bad methodology. For example, Ellens claims:

Too often, menopausal women today, in this age of feminism or womanism, move into a radically new mode of life. Basically it has one primary characteristic: she excludes her husband and schedules her time so as not to encounter him in any important personal way." (p. 9)

The claim itself is problematic because it implies that feminism or womanism is the source of menopausal women's excluding their husbands. But there is no clarity to the claim "too often" and no evidence for the generalization save the author's singular case from his own work in which there is no clear link drawn (empirically) between feminism and the conclusion about "too many" menopausal women. This lack of evidence-based research is a significant flaw in the book, a flaw that could be illustrated over and over.

But what is even more problematic in the book is its overriding patriarchal or perhaps male perspective. For example, it is presumed throughout the book that most if not all women can be brought to orgasm through the penis entering the vagina. Is there good empirical evidence for that claim?

Further, the primary metaphors with which Ellens writes are male-oriented. For example,

For sexually mature lovers, the resulting connection, communion, and union of the two highly charged erogenous zones, in penetration, pulsation, and gratification, inspires orgasm to become the healthy outpouring of an ecstasy that can properly be called spiritual. (p. 92)

Penetration? Ellens uses the term over and over. Again,

... for me penetration and orgasm feel like a homecoming, entering the haven, and my women friends tell me that for them it is the experience of being totally taken up by the sensation and completely filled to satisfaction. It gives them the sense that all is well and all is in order. The expected ship has found its haven and is home. They tell me that with a really cherished lover, the experience of being penetrated is like a feeling of a long harbored hunger, the filling of an enduring emptiness, the dissipation of a gnawing vacuum, the resolution of life's urges toward the meaning of things. (p. 86)

Well, perhaps from a male perspective this is how sexual intercourse feels (as over against foreplay and other sexual expression). Perhaps some women feel the way Ellens' women friends do. But surely alternative descriptions are possible. How about, "the woman surrounds the man, covering his need with her love?" Penetration? Perhaps less offensive descriptions would be better.

These flaws in the book unfortunately overshadow many of the good and helpful observations Ellens makes, including that sexual gymnastics and technical proficiency in sex are often confused with the deeper and richer possibilities of sexuality as engaging the totality of both persons involved -intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Or that sexual gymnastics leaves one feeling cold and without meaning. (But even here, one asks for some empirical evidence.) Or the importance of a master narrative in one's life to make meaning of so much of the seemingly disparate and confusing distractions of daily living.

Perhaps the author could have used a more egalitarian master story from which to approach the important subject of the spirituality of sex.

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