

*Examining Aspects of Sexualities*  
*and the Self*

**Edited by**

**Gemma Clarke, Fiona McQueen,  
Michaela Pnacekova, Sabrina Sahli**

# Critical Issues

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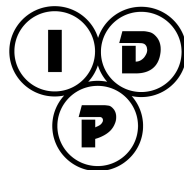
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Sexualities and the Self**

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**Gemma Clarke, Fiona McQueen,  
Michaela Pnacekova, Sabrina Sahli**

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## **Sex in Transition: Anti-Sexuality and the Church in Post-Communist Poland**

*Alicja A. Gescinska*

### **Abstract**

This chapter offers a critical evaluation of several aspects (of legal and social kind) of sexuality in postcommunist Poland. Special emphasis will be put on the role of the Church in the spread of antisexual opinions and attitudes in Poland and the threats and challenges this poses to a striving for sexual literacy and positive liberty. Contemporary attempts, like those of theologian and priest Ksawery Knotz, to refute these antisexual attitudes, will be dismissed as neither renewing nor really liberalising.

**Key Words:** Catholicism, Ksawery Knotz, positive liberty, sexual ethics, sexual literacy.

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### **1. Introduction**

In the years following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Central-European countries went through a period of transition in which the economic foundations of society were completely changed. Although economic phenomena unmistakably exercise an influence on our sexuality, the case of Poland shows that this economic transition hardly affected sexual relations and standards. The entire society was changing and developing towards a liberal democracy, but in the bedrooms of the Poles not much liberalisation could be noticed. As H. David wrote in a voluminous study of sexuality in the Central-European countries:

The Polish experience shows that economic development, processes of urbanization and modernization, as well as achievements of legal and educational equality by women, are not necessarily synonymous with or a guarantee of an enlightened sex life.<sup>1</sup>

In the first part of this chapter I will briefly sketch the inadequacy of the 'sexual transition' in Poland. The emphasis will be put on abortion policy, homosexuality, and the conservative - Catholic resistance against sexual education in schools and any sexual liberalisation and liberation. I will critically evaluate these phenomena from the perspective of the concepts of *sexual literacy* and *positive liberty*.

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In the second part of this chapter I will talk about the way the Catholic Church has recently tried to formulate a less rigid sexual ethics in Poland. Especially the popular writings of Ksawery Knotz, theologian and monk, are significant in this regard and have caused quite some fuss in the media. However, a critical reading and evaluation of Knotz' writings reveal that Knotz is not at all an advocate of a more liberal sexual ethics.

## 2. What is Sexual Literacy?

Before I continue, I would like to clarify what I mean with the term *sexual literacy*. In general, I think we, as a society and as individuals should strive towards more positive liberty: personal mastery, ability, autonomy and an active stance in moral life, accepting that external limitations can increase your freedom, as freedom without limits is anything but freedom at all. A merely negative freedom, defined as the absence of external limitations and restrictions, does not suffice to be really free. And it certainly does not contribute to any moral uplifting of society.

I have previously tried to argue that positive liberty is what we should aim for, also when it comes to our sexuality.<sup>2</sup> I have defined sexual literacy as the aim of our sexuality and defined it from the perspective of positive liberty. Sexual literacy is about personal mastery, acquired through conscious and unconscious learning, in which personal autonomy and an active, dynamic stance are of the utmost importance. I will now try to argue that the abortion policy, views on homosexuality and sexual education in Poland pose great threats and challenges to these principles.

## 3. Abortion, Homosexuality and Sexual Education

In 1956 Poland legalised abortion. Already in the seventies, but especially in the eighties (as communist power diminished) catholic resistance against this free abortion policy grew. This ultimately resulted in an anti-abortion law in 1993 after the system had collapsed. What is remarkable, is that an explicit antisexual discourse from the church and conservative catholics went hand in hand with this blunt resistance against abortion; an antisexual attitude which is above all evident in the fact that the church argued against any sexual education at schools and advocated abstinence only.

Although one can doubt whether abortion policies have any direct influence on the quality of people's sex life, the antisexual attitude which was stimulated with the anti-abortion policy in Poland is definitely opposed to an enlightened sexual life. Sociological research has for example shown that during the transition there was a significant increase of women in Poland who no longer wanted to have sex with their husbands; a phenomenon which was subtly described by Maria Nurowska in her novel *Grzy malzenskie* (1994). The main character of the novel sinks into an antisexual attitude which brings



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her to kill her husband. Although the novel is not a sociological or psychological study, Nurowska sometimes expresses a sharp insight into Polish society and public opinions:

In Poland everybody is sexually underdeveloped; we are about hundred years behind compared with the West. We live in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it comes to our mentality and on the field of love we live in the Stone Age.<sup>3</sup>

This is of course literary hyperbole, but it shows how the antisexual attitude was or still is a real issue in postcommunist Poland, and that a critical evaluation of it is desirable from the perspective of sexual literacy. I could also refer to statistic research which has shown that Poland stands at the bottom of the 'frequency of lovemaking' in Europe, which obviously also relates to the problem of antisexuality.<sup>4</sup>

This antisexuality does not contribute to an enlightened sex life and sexual literacy at all, as it hinders the active stance and dynamic process of learning which precedes all true positive liberty.

Neither does the negative public opinion about homosexuality in Poland contribute to an enlightenment of sexuality. A pluriform society with respect for others and their sexual preferences (as long as they are legal) is a main characteristic of a modern liberal democracy, and a precondition for sexual literacy. When a significant percentage of our citizens is limited and hindered in the exercise of their own sexual preferences and desires, this cannot be conducive to a more enlightened sexuality.

From the perspective of positive liberty and sexual literacy, especially the principle of autonomy – so central and sacred in positive liberty – seems to be threatened by a severe resistance to homosexuality: everyone should be able to pursue his or her own good; not only as a mere formal right (negative liberty), but as a real ability. And what are rights, when one is unable to enjoy them?

Autonomy is a crucial feature of sexual literacy. It is reflected in Anthony Giddens's assumption that a democratization of intimacy is necessary and that autonomy is the pillar of this democratization. Autonomy will provide and guard the personal boundaries necessary for an enlightened citizenry.<sup>5</sup>

An intolerant attitude towards homosexuality hinders this democratization and this forms an obstacle on the road to sexual literacy and true liberty. And there are of course many examples of the extremely negative attitude towards homosexuality in Polish society: the Polish gay-parade is known as the 'march of the barbarians', the Polish philosopher of law and senator Maria Szyszkowskawa - who has argued for more legal protection and advantages for same-sex-couples - has been threatened more

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than once, feminist and homosexual demonstrators were violently attacked during a manifestation in Poznan in 2004, and one could go on. Homosexuality is not only considered as reprehensible, but it is actively suppressed. This seems all the more astonishing, knowing that Poland had quite early legalised homosexuality. In 1932 it was decriminalised; however 'this legal situation has not changed perceptions of homosexuality as deviant'.<sup>6</sup>

The antisexual attitude of conservative Catholics, and the negative effect this has on sexual literacy, is above all evident in the fact that they try to oppose the spread of contraceptives and sexual education. The anti-abortion law of 1993 also stipulated that the availability of contraceptives should increase as well as the amount and quality of sexual education in schools. Due to pressure from conservatives, these aspects of the law were never implemented. In 1997 a new law was voted to restrict all sexual education:

Sex education has been replaced in schools by 'family life education' which exhorts young people to remain sexually abstinent until marriage, while perpetuating myths and misconceptions related to gender, sexuality and family planning.<sup>7</sup>

This situation of course reminds us of what happens in the US and which was critically sketched by Simon Blackburn:

Within the United States, the federal government spends some \$ 100,000,000 a year of American tax dollars on abstinence-only programs of sex education. This in spite of the fact that abstinence-only programs markedly increase young peoples' health risks by making sporadic, furtive, and unprotected copulations their only option.<sup>8</sup>

I assume I don't need to argue that a lack of sexual education and a simplistic stress on abstinence cannot be conducive to sexual experience. The importance of education in sexual, positive liberation and the development of 'sexual literacy' cannot sufficiently be stressed. Like any ability and mastery, sexual literacy is the result of a learning process. This process is in Poland entirely curtailed by the Catholic Church and conservatives. What counts as sexual education in Poland are the obligatory meetings with a priest for those couples who wish to marry in which they are told about natural birth control and their 'marital duties'.

So the lack of sexual education can be identified as yet another aspect of Polish post-communist society and legislation which is anything but

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conducive to a more enlightened sexual life. The need for change grows, and in the following section I will question whether the writings of Ksawery Knotz really give in to this need for liberalisation and change, as is often and generally assumed.

#### 4. The Problem of Unnatural Sex

The books of Father Knotz on sexuality got a lot of attention from the media; not only in Poland, but also abroad. An English translation of his latest book should appear next year, and one could speak of a real hype. His latest book was received as 'the Catholic Kamasutra' and the first part of its title – *Sex like you didn't know it* – does also arouse high hopes. But the books of Knotz do not meet these hopes and expectations. They definitely have some relevance: Knotz argues against anti-sexuality and says Catholicism should function as an excuse for not having sex. Knotz stresses the importance of sexuality as part of our *condition humane*, and he explicitly states that it is incorrect to assume sex can only be justified within Catholicism from the perspective of procreation.

But is all this really that renewing for a catholic thinker? Certainly not, and I would like to mention especially the name of Nikolaj Berdjajev, the greatest Russian philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose role in Polish thought is not insignificant. Already in 1916 Berdjajev criticised Christian anti-sexuality and abstinence-only discourses and in many ways Berdjajev was much more progressive than Knotz, while almost 100 years have gone by since! This is above all evident in the fact that Knotz more than once talks about natural and unnatural sex, dismissing as unnatural or abnormal sex those activities that for example imply the use of contraception or anal penetration.

Not only *how* Knotz defines 'natural sex' / 'normal sex', but the fact *that* he talks of 'normality' as a criteria to condemn certain activities, is a proof that Knotz is certainly not way ahead of his time. Once more I can refer to Berdjajev who wrote in *The Meaning of Creation* that normality is not applicable to sexuality, and certainly not to condemn certain sexual activities or to force one's own views upon others. In a way one could say that Berdjajev - although he was a conservative Christian philosopher - was an ideological predecessor of many modern thinkers who sought to define perversion and who came to the conclusion that it is almost impossible to define what is perverse and what is normal. As Berdjajev wrote himself:

Scientifically, nothing allows in fact to establish such a strict division between that, which is in this regard, 'normal' and 'natural', and that, which on the contrary is abnormal' and 'unnatural'. From a philosophical point of view, the category of 'the natural' must be rejected.<sup>9</sup>

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### 5. The Sanctification of the Vagina and Other Arguments

Knotz' definition of 'normal' and 'natural' sex does not approve of anal sex, the use of contraception, homosexuality, masturbation, and so on. Obviously Knotz does little to contribute to a reconciliation of catholic teachings on the one hand, and those sexual activities which are part of every daily life of many people but which the church does not recognise.

Knotz's view on good sex is almost solely defined by the penetration of the vagina. Any orgasm which does not result from the vaginal penetration of the woman, is incomplete, unsatisfactory, and ultimately, not worth much, according to Knotz. It even leads to a 'falsification of the love between man and woman'.<sup>10</sup> These are harsh words for lovers who think they come closer to each other through mutual masturbation and oral sex, while they apparently undermine the love that exists between them through those acts.

In order to obtain more persuasiveness, Knotz makes use of much false information concerning the influence on people's health of these activities which he defines as inferior and quite worthless. He states that orgasms which do not result from the penetration of the vagina are unsatisfactory and this dissatisfaction leads to mental problems. Such way of argumentation is of course very typical of the catholic way of thinking on sexuality.

The most remarkable of Knotz's 'medical arguments', is probably his claim that sperm is a source of vitamins, works as a natural Prozac, prevents breast cancer and improves the quality of the female skin.<sup>11</sup> That is of course, if this 'miracle drug' is taken vaginal, and certainly not oral or certainly not anally!

There are many such statements in Knotz's writings which are either morally or scientifically objectionable. He uses cheap, stereotypic, strange and sometimes even totally reprehensible arguments. One could perhaps find it amusing that Knotz claims that religion works as an aphrodisiac and increases the sexual urge. That may seem amusing, not very convincing, but it does not do much harm. But when Knotz writes that certain diseases aren't that frequently sexually transmitted as is often said, in order to condemn the use of contraception, we must find this less amusing and all the more worrying.

### 5. Conclusion

The fact that Knotz is not at all that renewing, and certainly hasn't written anything that could come near a 'Catholic Kamasutra', is perhaps most evident in the sources on which he grounds his views: the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) of pope Paul VI and the thought of Karol Wojtyla / pope John Paul II. The influence of the latter was of course very big in Poland in many ways, and his antisexual views have obviously determined

Knotz's own views. The fact that Knotz's thought is derived from such an explicit antisexual discourse, shows he cannot possibly be the liberator of catholic teachings relating to sexuality, as he is often said to be in Poland.

I have argued how certain legal and social phenomena in Poland hinder the development of sexual literacy and positive liberty. Antisexual discourses do not contribute to the dynamic process of learning which is inherent to sexual education and sexual literacy. The harsh and intolerant attitude towards homosexuality does form a threat to the principle of autonomy, so important in positive liberty, and therefore also to sexual literacy. The writings of Knotz do little to contribute to a change and improvement in this regard. There are far too many internal paradoxes, morally and scientifically objectionable statements in his writings. Whether there is a real process of liberalisation within the Catholic Church regarding sexuality in Poland, is therefore more than doubtful.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> H David, *From Abortion to Contraception. A Resource to Public Policies and Reproductive Behavior in Central and Eastern Europe from 1917 to the Present*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1999, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> I refer to my article *From Sexual Liberty to Sexual Liberation* which was presented at the Interdisciplinary.net Good Sex / Bad Sex conference in Budapest (May 2009)

<sup>3</sup> M Nurowska, *Het huwelijkspeel*, De Geus, Breda, 1997, pp. 106-107. (My own translation from the Dutch edition.)

<sup>4</sup> H David, op. cit., p. 186.

<sup>5</sup> A Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1993, p. 189.

<sup>6</sup> M Baer, 'Let Them Hear Us! The Politics of Same-sex: Transgression in Contemporary Poland', in *Transgressive Sex: Subversion and Control in Erotic Encounters*, H Donnan & F Magonan (eds), Berdhan books, 2009, p.133.

<sup>7</sup> F Girard. & W Nowicka (2002), 'Clear and Compelling Evidence: The Polish Tribunal on Abortion Rights'. *Reproductive Health Matters*, vol. 10, no. 19, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>8</sup> S Blackburn, *Lust: The Seven Deadly Sins*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, pp. 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> N Berdjaev, *Le sens de la création*, Desclée De Brouwer, Brugge, 1955, pp. 234-235. (My own translation from the French edition.)

<sup>10</sup> K Knotz, *Seks jakiego nie znacie: Dla malzonkow kochajacych Boga*, Swiety Pawel, Czestochowa, 2009, p. 81. (My own translation from the Polish original.)

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 146.

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