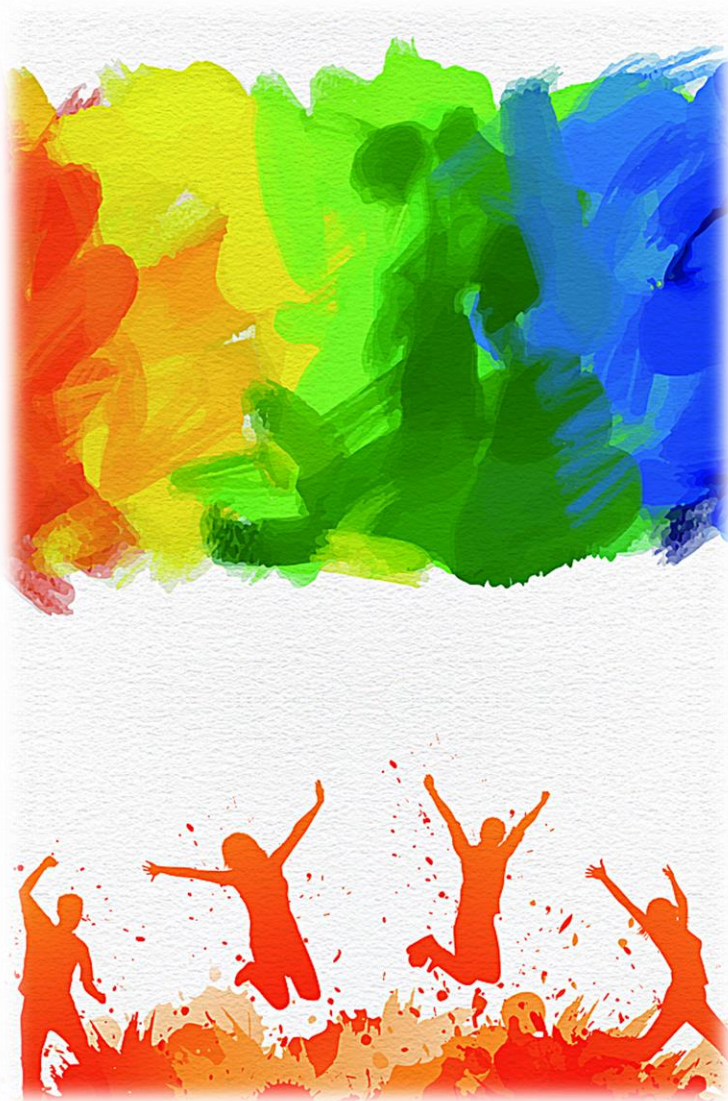


# Quest

## A Theology of Joy

by John Ashman



## Introduction

The subject of this document, A Theology of Joy, has its roots in the Quest Strategy Weekend held at St Aidan's Mission, Wainstalls, Halifax in June 2016. This document was presented to, and received by, the Quest National Committee at its meeting in London on Saturday 30th September 2017 and it is made available here for reflection.

## A Theology of Joy

The Invitatory is the psalm used at the beginning of each day in the Liturgy of the Hours, the Catholic Church's Divine Office. It is usually Psalm 94 (95), which begins in Latin "Venite, exultemus Domino"; in English, "Come, ring out our joy to the Lord". "Gaudium et spes" (English: "Joy and Hope"), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, which was one of the four constitutions resulting from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the longest document, begins: "The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts"<sup>1</sup>.

At the start of each day and at the centre of our daily engagement with the world, joy is fundamental. But how in our experience is this joy expressed? It is like a peak moment in our life, a sensation of fullness in which life seems positive, meaningful, and worthy of being lived; we are, for a time, 'on top of the world'. There is the joy of waiting, of anticipation (meeting a friend, a lover, a birth, a reunion); the joy of being in someone's presence; the joy of a celebration; the joy of a recollection. Joy is often associated with meeting others and the positive experience of being with them. There can also be a spontaneity connected with joy, perhaps when not planned for and least expected.

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<sup>1</sup> Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World "Gaudium et spes" Promulgated by his holiness, Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

The Theology of Joy and the Good Life project, under the auspices of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture at Yale Divinity School in the United States, conducts research and facilitates interdisciplinary conferences and other gatherings to build a transformative movement driven by a Christian articulation of the joy that attends the flourishing human life. The website describes joy as being:

- “fundamental to human existence and well-being, yet it is an elusive phenomenon that resists definition. For more than two millennia, the articulation and cultivation of joy was at the centre of Jewish and Christian scripture, theology, and practices—an articulation and cultivation that in turn was grounded in and evolved over centuries of lived human experience, observation and discernment. Notwithstanding the importance of joy to human well-being and the deep, ancient religious foundations for understanding and cultivating joy, the very idea of joy has all but disappeared from modern theological reflection, is all but ignored by the social sciences, and is increasingly absent from lived experience. The consequence is a ‘flattening out,’ a ‘greying,’ of human life and communities—abundance of entertainment notwithstanding—and a sharp bloom of individual and communal dysfunction.
- “The Theology of Joy and the Good Life project seeks to restore joy to the centre of Christian reflection on the nature of the good life and to restore the question of the good life to the core of Christian theology, the world’s colleges and universities, and our most significant global conversations.”<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of Christianity is the “euongelion”, the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. In its essence this good news is that God has raised the crucified Christ to be the Lord of the world, therefore Christianity is unique in the sense that it is a religion of joy; this is the unique gift of Christianity to the world. Compared with Judaism with the Torah at its centre, Islam articulated by the Qur’an, and Buddhism – they are all unique in their centre, but the centre of the resurrection is unique to Christianity.

Joy is distinct from fun, a superficial feeling which must be repeated again and again to last, whereas joy is a deeper feeling of the whole of existence. You can

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<sup>2</sup> <http://faith.yale.edu/>

have fun at the side, but you can experience joy only with “one’s whole heart, whole soul, and all one’s energies . . . We are created for joy. We are born for joy”<sup>3</sup> .

Schiller, the German poet, philosopher, physician, historian, and playwright, whose poem “Ode to Joy” was brilliantly incorporated into the final movement of Beethoven’s ninth symphony, thought that joy is divine. It comes from outside into our life in a surprise, in a turning from sadness to goodness, from sickness to health, from loneliness to communion and this turning point awakens joy.

In terms of a Christology (i.e. the study of who Jesus was/is, what are his aims/teachings, why he died, why early Christianity began in the way that it did, etc), the life of Jesus is bordered at either end by joy: the news of his birth brought a joy intended for the entire world (Luke 2:10), and the saving interventions of his life hurtle toward joy as their telos – their end or purpose – (Heb 12:2). In terms of a moral anthropology, joy is listed by St. Paul among the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23), and to “rejoice always” is, again, famously among the injunctions he issues to the church at Philippi (Phil 4:4). In terms of the doctrine of God, the three parables of Luke 15 – the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son – all describe God’s reaction to the repentance of sinners in terms of joy. This is an echo and amplification of the significance of joy in the Hebrew Bible, perhaps most clearly stated when Psalm 16 boldly declares that there is “fullness of joy in [God’s] presence” (16:11). These are but three examples of teachings into which the biblical testimony on joy promises to breathe new life. Joy stands at the very core of Christian faith, life, and practice. Sara Maitland suggests that joy is our duty; it is “the only ethical imperative in response to God’s love as revealed in the whole created universe”.<sup>4</sup>

Human joy is rooted in God’s own joy, famously depicted in the parables of Luke chapter 15 as the abundant, excessive rejoicing of the father at the repentant return of his son. Christian joy stands in contrast both to what Jürgen Moltmann, the German Protestant theologian, provocatively terms the “fun society”

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<sup>3</sup> Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture and the Good Life. Christianity: a Religion of Joy, 11

<sup>4</sup> A Joyful Theology: Creation, Commitment, and an Awesome God, 125

(Spaßgesellschaft) and refers to as the opiate-like joy characteristic of Schiller's "Ode to Joy." Instead, Christian joy both motivates dissatisfaction with conditions of suffering and is a deep wellspring of abiding hope in God's work of redemption: "Joy in life's happiness motivates us to revolt against the life that is destroyed and against those who destroy life. And grief over life that is destroyed is nothing other than an ardent longing for life's liberation to happiness and joy".<sup>5</sup> Of course, as Christians, we experience our share of sadness and pain that renders joy temporarily impossible. Such moments exist, but Christian joy continues to live in our inmost depths as part of our life hidden in God. It is the joy that cannot be taken from us, a joy that we see in the lives of the Christian martyrs.

## **Sexual pleasure**

Contrary to the belief of many Christians, the writers of the Bible were not as concerned about the acts of sexual intercourse as they were about human relationships and the motives and consequences of sexual acts. It is a tragedy that the Christian faith has focussed on a few scriptural references and "natural law" in order to enforce particular concepts of sexual morality. Christian minds can be so flexible and non-literal regarding some parts of the Bible and yet so inflexible and literal on others. Take for example the flexibility with regard to references to semen and menstruation (Lev 15:16-30); the treatment of a disobedient son (Deut 21:18-21); women in church (1 Cor 14:34-35); submission of wives (Eph 5:6); slavery (Eph 6:5); and the proper dress and behaviour of women (1 Tim 2:9-15). Compare this with the rigidity evident when dealing with masturbation (Gen 38:6-10); same-sex practices (Gen 19:1-28; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 1 Tim 1:9-10); and transgender people and transvestites (Deut 22:5).

In reality, Jesus himself made love the central core of his message and ministry and nowhere in his teaching does he condemn sexual pleasure. His concern is always the wholeness, the spiritual well-being, and the loving relationships of people. Therefore, our experience of God necessarily involves our entire body, including the sexual expression of love. Sarah Coakley, Norris-Hulse Professor of

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<sup>5</sup> Joy and Human Flourishing, Christianity: a Religion of Joy, 14

Divinity at the University of Cambridge, says: “We need to understand sex as really about God and about the deep desire that we feel for God – the precious clue that is woven into our existence about the final and ultimate union that we seek”, adding, “Human sexual desire is in some sort of analogous relationship to divine desire”.<sup>6</sup>

William Masters and Virginia Johnson pioneered research into the nature of human sexual response in the United States, beginning in the late 1950s until the early 1990s. As a result of their work, we have discovered that males and females are born sexual and that sexual responses occur from before birth until death. This has important implications for our understanding of our creation as sexual beings with the potential for sexual pleasure as a natural part of life. Masters and Johnson also championed the right of gay men and lesbians to have their sexual problems respected and treated, although their advocacy of “cures” for homosexuality is less widely applauded today.

The fact that sexual response is pleasurable is of theological significance: the Creator intended sexual pleasure for humans. Pleasure is intricately woven into human sexual response. It is hardly surprising that many women and men, whether homosexual or heterosexual, suffer from a lack of sexual desire and a certain joylessness which they attribute to their religious upbringing. This is surely an indictment of Christian theologies that have failed to take into account the theory of sexual pleasure or even a theological affirmation of sexual expression other than for procreative purposes. Even though sexual pleasure is an important part of faithful, vowed human relationships and sexual function, within the Church rarely are children taught or adults helped to experience the fullness of God’s intention for sexual pleasure. Love, spirituality, and sexuality are inextricably bound together. It is nature’s (and God’s) intention to create people who are sexual in the fullest sense of the word: “God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good” (Gen 1:31).

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<sup>6</sup> A New Asceticism – Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God, 96,97

## **Conclusion**

Saint Irenaeus of Lyons (early 2nd century) wrote a remarkable phrase which, in the translation we are most familiar with, reads: “The glory of God is man fully alive” (Against Heresies, Book 4, 20:7). Joy is at the heart of what it means to be a person fully alive. In our hope-filled journey toward the Lord, we look forward to meeting the One whose face we have sought with longing during the days of our existence. The joy of those who believe is what tells the world about the glory of God!

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## **Further Reading**

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## **Acknowledgement**

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