

swapping partners. They were later vilified by Roman writers as prostitutes. 'Among the Etruscans who had become extravagantly luxurious, it is customary for the slave girls to wait on the men naked,' whinged Timaeus.

His 4th Century BC sympathiser, Theopompus of Chios, also had mixed feelings about these apparently wanton luses. 'Sharing wives is an established Etruscan custom,' he wrote. 'Etruscan women take particular care of their bodies and exercise often... it is not a disgrace for them to be seen naked. They are expert drinkers and very attractive. It is no disgrace for them to do anything in the open, or to be seen having it done to them, for they consider it a native custom. They sometimes make love and have intercourse while people are watching them... and are keen on making love to women.'

Exhibitionism, multiple fuck-buddies, and bi tendencies – go, Etruscan girl, go!

Art frescoes of the time depict all manner of exhibitionist and homosexual frolics. In Pompeii, gay sex, group sex and its varieties were performed with gusto and perceived as normal. Babylonian babes also faced negative PR for the ancient custom of having sex with strangers in temples without refusal and, in return, being bestowed with holiness by their Goddess.

It's a spiritual thing

This cult of sexual rites and religious ideology was cross-cultural and famously apparent in the East. Sacred sexuality forms a common link between the social history of India, China and the Middle East as well as Europe. The concept of sexuality as a channel to the spiritual is widely recognised in the Indian religion of Tantra, which evolved into the Chinese belief-system of Taoist alchemy.

The 'sacred lunacy' of Dionysius alluded to earlier has obvious resonance with the system of sacred sexuality in which the participants enter into a hallucinatory state to mover closer to the divine.

Polyamory, the practice of being in multiple and consensual relationships with others, is an acknowledged branch of this family tree. Polyandry, big in ancient India, allowed women to have many husbands at a time, as documented in the literature of the Puranas. Here, the queen, Madhavi, bore children from several different fathers. The *Kunala-Jataka* (Sacred Books of the Buddhists) recounts how Princess Kavita chose five husbands at a time. The Konarak Temple on the Bay of Bengal displays the energy of a man fornicating with several women. Meanwhile, a girl in a cluster with many men is portrayed in the Shiva temple of Jagan Nath in Kathmandu. In the Khajuraho complex of temples (built between 950-1150 CE) in India, sculptures of couples in the flush of group sex and Tantric yoga positions are displayed.

Helping hands

The so-called 'dakinis' of the Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, are often present in the sexual fray. These semi-divine women act as the sexual helpers of coupled couples – a kind of spiritual fluff girl to the couple. But in Tantric ritual mode, that familiar spirituo-religious ecstasy surfaces once more, earning the dakinis the status of time-transcending 'sky-walkers'.

Not quite swinging

Modern incarnations of sexual freedom and religion prevail in the practice of polyamory. Polyamory and swinging share certain ideals in that both concern multiple sexual partners with consent among participants. The departure point is that polyamory is more concerned with sustaining relationships while swinging is, well, casual fun.

Swinging also shares the concept of 'compersion' with polyamory. This is the pleasure that swingers derive from watching their partner sexually engaging with another individual. This contemporary sexual 'giving' of one's partner strikes chords with the sexual 'donations' of the ancients to their gods. Paradoxically, sexual indulgence becomes sexual selflessness.

If compersion has a copyright, then this probably belongs to the Kerista Commune in San Francisco, which espouses the cult of

polyamory. Its modern twist on ancient practice saw the Commune adopt the singer Joan Jett as its 'Matron Saint'. We love your brand of rock 'n' roll too, Joan.

Staying in the modern world, the Church of All Worlds (CAW) markets itself as one of the oldest incorporated Neo-Pagan churches in the US, with a properly constituted board of directors and an ordained priesthood of men and women. CAW is often said to have been inspired by Robert Heinlein's Sci Fi novel, *Stranger in a Strange Land* which explores alternative spiritual pathways.

Although this article has traversed thousands of years across the anthropological ages – from the ancient Sumerians to the contemporary American – one principle is recurrent, and CAW roots this in its philosophy that sexuality is an expression of the divine. CAW advances the concept of 'positive sexuality', which adopts consensual sex with the aim of social bonding. It also supports the practice of sacred sexuality and its accompanying rituals. Full circle – or linear development?

In concluding a social 'fit', the swinging community is but one branch of alternative views on sexuality and the social code.

However, whether your perspective is informed by swinging, Neo-Paganism or the variants of polyamory, perhaps all branches would concur with the opinion of George Bernard Shaw:

'Confusing monogamy with morality has done more to destroy the conscience of the human race than any other error.'

