

IMAGO DEI AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

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In a city like Rome there is no shortage of artistic portrayals of the human condition – Byzantine apses, Romanesque side-chapels, even bridges spanning the Tiber bear portraits of men and women redeemed and transformed. Sometimes, more darkly, we find men and women distressed and disordered – skewered and shovelled by devils into the pit.

‘Man’ (used as the collective here) is a Protean race. It is not just that within our species we can find a pick-pocket and a Virgil, but individually each one of us can be small and great. This is true physically, for we all begin as babies, but also spiritually for each sinner has the capacity to become a saint.

Within Christian anthropology a better word than ‘protean’ for this open-endedness is ‘eschatological’: human beings are eschatological and teleological. The baby has its *telos* in the woman or the man, and the sinner has her *telos* in the saint. By contrast to the secular and social scientific discipline of the same name, ‘Christian’ anthropology understands our human nature not only in terms of what we are but of what we may be. We have the potential to become what we are not yet, or are not fully.¹

Christian anthropology, a name I prefer to ‘the Christian doctrine of Man’, is not a member of that list of sciences which includes entomology, rodentology, and ornithology. The extension to that list which covers our species is ‘primatology’. To include Christian anthropology in the list would be a category error.² Christian anthropology is not a branch of the natural

¹ This is not a view only to be found in Christian anthropology. It is a central plank, for instance of that of Jean-Paul Sartre. I am indebted to one of my doctoral students, Fr. Stephen Wang, for directing me to the similarities in the anthropologies of Sartre and Aquinas.

² And one I suspect is sometimes made by crude invocations of ‘natural law’ theory which proceed as though the human good can be read directly off our animal nature.

or the social sciences, although it may make use of all of them, but a division of *sacra doctrina*, or holy teaching, and its kindred disciplines are Christology, ecclesiology, pneumatology and soteriology – the Christian understanding of the Christ, of the Church, of the Spirit, of salvation.

Each of these ‘scientia’ are predicated to some degree on revelation, but Christian anthropology needs very little to get started – sufficient to say that Christian anthropology depends upon saying that we are creatures. We are creatures in the strong sense – that is, we are created. But this implies a Creator and, in Christian, Jewish and Muslim thought, a Creator understood to be good.

Christian anthropology is closely related to two other scientia – the first is ‘theology’, a term we use generally to cover all manner of religious thought but which I use here to mean ‘the doctrine of God’. Christian anthropology is close to theology not because we are God-like,³ but because we are created by God and our destiny – the destiny of all reasoning creatures, according to Aquinas – is to share in the Triune life of God. Augustine puts the same point in a different way – ‘Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee’. This is a creaturely *telos* as real for Augustine and Aquinas, as that of the acorn to grow to an oak.⁴

Human beings are growing, changing things – destined to become what they are not yet. But human beings are also in Christian (and Jewish and Muslim) teaching ‘made in the image of God’ (*Genesis* 1.26-7). Theologians have puzzled over the centuries over this mysterious claim. How can it be so? It cannot be by virtue of our physical bodies since God does not have a body. Might it be in virtue of rationality or mind? This is the favoured settlement, although some Jewish writers have argued that to say man is in the image of God is to say that man lacks an essence, since God has no essence – an extreme form of the ‘Protean’ view. Some Orthodox theologians suggest, to my mind convincingly, that to say ‘man is in the image of God’ is to say that ‘man is mystery’, because God is mystery.⁵ One consequence is that we do not know who or what we are – pos-

³ ‘What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable!’ is, after all, uttered by Hamlet in despairing mode. I am grateful to Greg Seach for pointing out the context.

⁴ God is complete fullness of Being, abundant, out-pouring life whereas we are seeking, questing creatures. Put metaphysically, in God there are no accidents. Put positively from our point of view, we are designed to grow physiologically, morally and spiritually.

⁵ Andrew Louth has used this to good effect in arguments about manipulation of embryos in reproductive technology.

itively as well as negatively. 'Know thyself' is, after all, a pagan and not a Christian injunction.⁶

Much has been made of the negative aspects of 'not knowing who we are' but this teaching has a positive register, too, and one at the heart of faith: 'Beloved, we are God's children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him...' (I *John* 3.2-3).

And this brings us to the second of that list of theological subdivisions (ecclesiology, pneumatology) to which Christian anthropology is nearly related, and it is Christology, which also brings me onto the topic of sexual difference.

Around the main door of Bologna's Cathedral, the Basilica di S. Petronio, run a series of carved stone tablets: on the left the creation of Adam and of Eve, the temptation of the serpent, expulsion from the garden; on the right the manger, the visit of the shepherds, and of the Magi. The whole magnificent series, executed by Jacopo della Quercia between 1425 and 1438, shows our human history: the first creation on the left of the portal, and our new creation in Christ on the left. But it is to della Quercia's representation of the creation of Eve that I wish to draw attention.

Adam is asleep on the left, turned away from the centre of the carving where God – clearly the Triune God since He has a triangular halo – is drawing Eve out of Adam's side. It is a very statuesque 'Eve'. Although not yet risen to her full height, it is clear that when Eve does so she will be exactly the same height as God. Indeed she has the same distinctive aquiline nose as God, the same lips and much the same hair. She has fem-

⁶ Contrast this maxim of ancient philosophy with Augustine in the Confessions. As a brash and successful young rhetorician he thinks he knows himself. It is only when he embraces Christian faith that he has painfully to admit that he is, and remains, a mystery to himself. With good Biblical precedent, viz St. Paul, 'For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do'. (*Romans* 7.19). Or Cranmer's beautiful expression of the Pauline sentiment:

We have followed too much the devices and desires
of our own hearts.

We have offended against thy holy laws.

We have left undone those things
which we ought to have done;

and we have done those things
which we ought not to have done;

Both accounts are clearly psychologically recognizable.

inine and more youthful versions of God's eyes and God's mouth. She is fully in the image of God.

The artist has brought together two *Genesis* texts – *Genesis* 1.26-7 (“Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion...” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them”); and *Genesis* 2.18-23 where having created the earth, the plants and ‘Hadam’, the earth creature, God sees that that it is not good for Hadam to be alone. God then creates the animals and birds and, when Hadam fails to find one amongst them to be his partner, at last from ‘woman’ from the man’s side (‘ishshah’ from ‘ish’ in the Hebrew).

Della Quercia’s carving captures the moment before Adam wakes to say ‘this at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh’. Adam sleeps soundly on while still Eve and her Creator enjoy a quiet, dawn of creation, *tete à tete*, and God delights in this, ‘His’ newest creature.

Philosophical theologians, at least Catholic ones, do not characteristically treat the first books of *Genesis* as historical or scientific fact. Even St. Augustine in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis* conjectured that by six days the *Genesis* text could not mean six units of 24 hours, not least because the first ‘days’ take place before the sun and the moon, whose movements describe days and nights, were created. Those who compiled *Genesis* did not mean to give an account of the first seconds of the Universe. The origins that concerned them more concerned relations – the relation of God to humankind, of God to Abraham, and to the Israelites who descended from him, and so on. *Genesis* is thus consulted not as science but as a source for certain primitive Christians beliefs, ‘primitive’ not because they are naïve, but because they are basic. Amongst these are that God created all that is; that ‘all that is’ is good, that the human being is created in the image of God. None of these need conflict with anything science can tell us, although equally science could not even conceivably be called upon to demonstrate them. They play a regulative role in Christian thought and practice – for instance, the belief that each one is made ‘in the image of God’ is substantially the basis for Christian respect for each human life, and one reason why we go to extremes to save the lives of very disabled human babies but do not spare the lives of intelligent and healthy pigs.⁷

⁷ For a tirade against this privileging of human as opposed to animal life as based on the, to their mind, groundless (because theological) notion of man as made ‘in the image of God’ see Peter Singer and Helga Kuhse, *Should the Baby Live?*, a forthright

The *Genesis* text also speaks about sexual difference. It is constitutive of human beings, and it is good. It is not good for man to be alone.

Contemporary biblical critics believe that the stories of the creation of man of *Genesis* 1 and 2 arise from two different sources which fed into the final text of the book, and they do not nowadays spend much time trying to resolve their inconsistencies. It was not so for the Fathers for whom any apparent contradiction had to be resolved.

One might have thought the Fathers with their Biblical conservatism would give priority to the narrative of *Genesis* 1 if only because it is the first, but overwhelmingly they preferred to discuss the second creation narrative where Eve is made from Adam's side. *Genesis* 1.27 on its own certainly is puzzling. What can it mean that God created man in His own image, male and female? Early theologians canvassed the idea of a primal androgyne which, or who, was subsequently supplanted by the later creation of two persons of different sexes, but this reading was soon dropped in favour of concentration on the second story.⁸ However it was the story of *Genesis* 2 read in a particular way – a way which fitted better the accepted order of things – man was alone first and God created Eve for *him* as a companion and an helper.

Unlike *Genesis* 1, where male and female together comprise the 'imago', *Genesis* 2 can be, and has been, read as saying that Adam on his own was virtually sufficient. He could do everything, so it seems, except reproduce. Eve is made as a 'helper', but 'helper' was routinely understood by the early theologians as a subordinate – leaping over the fact that elsewhere in *Genesis* God Himself is described as 'helper' using the same Hebrew word.⁹ Woman was routinely thought of as lesser, almost an afterthought. And how could it be any other way, given the position of women in the late antique Hellenistic culture now reading these ancient Jewish texts as their own, Christian texts?

argument for infanticide. Singer and Kuhse, it seems to me, are well-warranted in thinking our privileging of human life (which he regards as species-ist) is historically grounded in the Jewish and Christian teaching from *Genesis*.

⁸ See Wayne A Meeks, 'Image of the Androgyne: some uses of a symbol in earliest Christianity', *History of Religions* 13 (1974), pp. 165-208.

⁹ Some exegetes have pointed out that reading 'Eve' as God's afterthought goes against the general pattern of the *Genesis* creation narratives in which the more perfect creatures are those made last – sea and dry land are followed by sun and moon, birds and beasts, man and – finally – woman.

What kind of helper? Augustine famously surmised that for help in the fields another man would have been more useful, and for conversation another man more interesting and this, he concluded leaves procreation as the one thing man cannot do by himself. Man is whole and complete on his own. The woman adds nothing new to the genius of the human race, otherwise complete in itself, except affording it the capacity to reproduce.

This picture of man (the male) as able to do everything, except reproduce, has informed theological anthropology down the modern period. It is, in its way, a kind of egalitarianism in which women bring nothing other to the table but reproductive capacity and 'man' (here meaning 'male') is the default position for humanity. Thus when we speak of 'man' we include everyone, except when dealing with matters peculiar to females such as pregnancy, childbirth and abortion. But this is not simply a matter of language. In Catholic theological anthropology, for instance sexual 'monoculture' persists right into the texts of *Gaudium et Spes* and beyond.¹⁰ Sexual difference, rightly or wrongly, is largely a matter of indifference, and women are to be treated just like 'men' except where they have different problems, for instance in questions of reproduction or, in *Gaudium et Spes* and more recent encyclicals, in women's freedom to work, or to marry without force, or to avoid exploitation and so on.

This sexual monoculture is in one sense praiseworthy for it rests on the conviction that women as well as men are fully in the image of God – a matter which was not uncontested in the early Church. Paul's puzzling injunction in I *Corinthians* 11.7: 'For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection of God: but woman is the reflection of man' could be and was read by some as suggesting that women were not fully in the image of God. More to the point, Paul's comment on veiling had to be reconciled with his statement later in the same letter that 'The first man (*anthropos*) was from the earth, a man of dust: the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust: and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven' (I *Corinthians* 15.47), and with *Colossians* 1.15, 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation: for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created ... all things have been created through him and for him'.¹¹

¹⁰ The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, promulgated in 1965.

¹¹ See also *Romans* 8.29-30. In I *Corinthians* Paul here conflates *Genesis* 1 and *Genesis* 3, for mention of men and women made in the 'image' comes only in the former, and the man of dust in the latter.

The Christological texts weighed heavily with the early theologians. If Jesus Christ, unquestionably male, is the image of the invisible God, and we will all bear the image of this man of heaven then it seemed reasonable to conclude that women will be resurrected as men. Some Christian theologians said as much.¹² Augustine to his lasting credit said ‘no’ – those who hold the woman’s sex to be a defect or something necessitated only by the Fall are quite wrong. Women will be resurrected as women in heaven, although without inciting lust. In saying this Augustine sought to avoid the inference that woman, on her own, could not be in the image of God. The female sex is not an afterthought to compensate for the disastrous effects of the Fall.

We find ourselves to this very day pulled between two positions which are each compelling but seem at the same time incompatible. We must say that, Christologically-speaking women and men cannot be different for ‘all will bear the image of the man of heaven’. But we must also say that sexual difference is not, or should not be a matter of theological indifference. Sexual difference has something to tell us, not just about human beings, but about God in whose image they are made. The unresolved question then is – where, why and how does sexual difference make a difference?¹³

It is now forty years since the Catholic Church received the ‘Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the World’ known as *Gaudium et Spes*. One of this document’s most striking features then, as now and noted by Cardinal Scola in his introduction to a new printing, is its Christocentric anthropology. It is a vision of man as everywhere related to Jesus Christ. Rereading it now with a view to sexual difference is an interesting experience.¹⁴

The document is visionary in anticipating the changing perceptions by women and of women before feminism had made much of an impres-

¹² See Kari Vogt, “‘Becoming Male’: one aspect of early Christian anthropology’ in *Women: Invisible in Church and Society*, ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Collins, *Concilium*, No. 6, 1985. Reprinted in eds. Janet Soskice and Diana Lipton, *Feminism and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 49-62.

¹³ That it does on the ground, and in actual matters of life and death is altogether evident from the findings of the United Nations, Aid agencies and other NGOs over the last two decades. Poverty and its handmaiden, war, effect women, the elderly and children disproportionately. Female morbidity figures outstrip male in all but the most affluent countries (see Amartya Sen’s seminal work). The poorest of the poor are, overwhelmingly, women, and their status as ‘the poor’ is not separable from the burdens they bear and the disadvantages they face as women. These fact don’t need to be rehearsed here.

¹⁴ Especially in the new English translation of the text which studiously avoids inclusive language and uses ‘man’ generically throughout, except when women are being particularly discussed.

sion in any of the Christian churches. Women, *per se*, are mentioned relatively rarely but come up where the document addresses the social tension between men and women (§8), their claim for equality (§9), the sexual traffic in women (§27), their lack of freedom, in some parts of the world, to choose their husband (§29), and the dignity of the conjugal pact (§47). The document says even less about men, *per se*, because when 'man' is the default position it is hard to tell when males specifically are under discussion, and when human beings in general. In the key presentations of its Christological anthropology 'man' (*homo*) is meant to include everyone.¹⁵ The section on 'the Dignity of the Human Person' drives home the point that man is made in the image of God, male and female; that on 'the Community of Man' reinforces the teaching of Christ is the true image ('All men have a rational soul and are created in God's image; they share the same nature and origin; redeemed by Christ, they have the same divine vocation and destiny; so it should be more and more recognized that they are essentially equal') (§28). This line of argument reaches a crescendo in 'The Concerns of Man in the World at Large' where we read,

Only God, who created man in his own image and redeemed him from sin, provides the full answer to these questions through revelation in Christ his Son made man. Whoever follows Christ, the perfect man, himself becomes more of a man (§41).

This is the implication of the Biblical teaching, already called to mind in §21, that Christ 'became truly one of us, like us in everything except sin' and that the Christian, whether male or female, is to be 'conformed to the image of the Son who is the first-born among many brethren (*Romans* 8.29; *Col.* 1.18)'.

At the heart of this document, and at the heart of New Testament itself, is an anthropology in which,

The mystery of man becomes clear only in the mystery of the incarnate Word. Adam, the first man (*primus homo*), was a type of the future, that is of Christ our Lord. Christ, the new Adam, in revealing the mystery of the Father and his love, makes man fully clear to himself, makes clear his high vocation (§22).

¹⁵ So for instance the concluding sentence of the introduction reads 'In the light of Christ, the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation the Council means to address itself to everybody, to shed light on the mystery and man and cooperate in finding solutions to the problems of our time' (§10).

The unanswered question is 'does Christ make woman fully clear to herself?' The Latin of the instruction uses the more inclusive *homo/homine*, but the patterning is upon Adam and Christ, both male. What can it mean for women, for me, to say with *Gaudium et Spes* and the scriptural witness that 'Whoever follows Christ, the perfect man, himself becomes more of a man' §41 (*Quicumque Christum sequitur, Hominem perfectum, et ipse magis homo fit*). Do those aspects in which I am to become perfected or 'more of a man' include only those aspects I share with males, like my intellect and my life of virtue, or do they also include my mothering, my loving, my sense of my own embodiment which must be different from that of a man? Is Christ the fulfilment of female 'men', as well as male 'men', and if so, how?¹⁶

The text of *Gaudium et Spes* contrasts strikingly with that of letter 'On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World' sent to the Catholic bishops in the summer of 2004. Whereas the former almost elides sexual difference, the latter speaks of sexual difference as 'belonging ontologically to creation', an expression which is hard to construe but which fortunately falls short of saying that there is an 'ontological difference' between men and women. That would indeed be odd, for one can see an ontological difference between a stone and a human being, but it would be difficult to see an ontological difference between a man and a woman, unless one also said there could be an *ontological* difference between any two individuals. One can say this, but it is somewhat vapid.

A more serious problem with this emphasis on 'ontological difference' is not philosophical but theological. Too strong a stress risks putting the 2004 letter at odds, not only with *Gaudium et Spes*, but with Scripture itself if it suggests that a woman cannot say that, in every significant sense, Christ is like me except without sin. It is for this reason that we must insist that, Christologically-speaking, men and women *cannot* be different.

But is sexual difference without theological import? Can we return to our tradition of sexual monoculture, of sexual 'indifference'? I think not, and perhaps della Quercia's creation of Eve can hint the way forward. *Genesis* 1.27, with its suggestion that male and female together comprise the *imago dei* has yet to be fully explored by theology.¹⁷

¹⁶ The Biblical allusion seems to be to *Ephesians* 4.13 which reads 'Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ' (the King James Version retains 'perfect man' in translation of *andra* in the Greek).

¹⁷ The idea that human beings are made in the image of God is only expressed in *Genesis* 1, where it is said they are made in God's image, male and female – the 'Adam's

It is notable that della Quercia's God, from his triangular halo, is clearly a triune God. God is three in one, unity in difference. Human beings in their createdness mirror this divine procession of love in being more than one, male and female. Christian theology must affirm that all human beings are *in imago dei* and that women are different from men. This means that women were not *made for men* any more (or any less) than men were *made for women*. The as yet unsung glory of *Genesis* 1.27-27 is that the fullness of divine life and creativity is reflected by a humankind which is male and female, which encompasses if not an ontological then a primal difference.

The fecundity of creation in the *Genesis* narrative comes from difference, the difference of light and dark, of sea and dry land.

In the midst of his *Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers* Friedrich Schleiermacher provides, without explanation, this brief 'midrash' on *Genesis*:

Let me disclose to you a secret that lies concealed in one of the most ancient sources of poetry and religion. As long as the first man was alone with himself and nature, the deity did indeed rule over him; it addressed the man in various way, but he did not understand it, for he did not answer it; his paradise was beautiful and the stars shone down on him from a beautiful heaven, but the sense for the world did not open within him; he did not even develop within his soul but his heart was moved by a longing for a world, and so he gathered before him the animal creation to see if one might perhaps be formed from it. Since the deity recognized that his (the deity's) world would be nothing so long as man was alone, it created for him a partner, and now, for the first time, the world rose before his eyes. In the flesh and bone of his bone he discovered humanity, and in humanity the world; from this moment on he became capable of hearing the voice of the deity and of answering it, and the most sacrilegious transgression of its laws from now on no longer precluded him from association with the eternal being.¹⁸

Schleiermacher never identifies the 'flesh of Adam's flesh' as woman. His point is not that man needs woman, but that to be human we need

rib' narrative of *Genesis* 2 says nothing of the 'imago'. Paul makes the conflation of Adam and the 'imago', and it may be that other Jewish writers of his time did the same.

¹⁸ Schleiermacher, *Speeches on Religion to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter, p. 119-20.

others – who are different from ourselves. Scheiermacher realises, as did Wittgenstein, that were Adam alone in the garden he would not only be unable to reproduce, he would be unable to speak. Speech is a pre-eminently social possession. And without speech there would be no praise, no prayer, no ‘world’. We become ourselves through being with others.

God is Love. We learn love through the reciprocity of our human condition, through being in relation to others who are different from ourselves – mothers, fathers, brothers, husbands, and wives. Within sexual difference is a primordial difference, a template for the fruitfulness that can come not when two are the same, but when they are different. For human creatures, as for sea and dry land, light and dark, fecundity is in the interval. And this is why sexual difference is not just instrumental to marriage or even to the family. It is good in itself.

‘Beloved, we are God’s children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him ...’ (I *John* 3.2-3).

We stand to learn a great deal in the years to come as women begin to do theology. Will they write the same things as men? It remains to be seen. But we will never know what Man is until we can say, as Irenaeus obviously intended, ‘the glory of God is woman fully alive’.