Christian Masculinity

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Published by Leuven University Press

Werner, Yvonne Maria.
Christian Masculinity: Men and Religion in Northern Europe in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

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THE NEW CATHOLIC FEMINISM

TRADITION AND RENEWAL IN CATHOLIC GENDER THEOLOGY

GÖSTA HALLONSTEN

The Male Woman - A Feminine Ideal in the Early Church is the title of a posthumous study by the late Kerstin Aspegren.\(^1\) The title conveys accurately the main device used by patristic authors to solve the problem of how women, being inferior in the social sphere, yet are able to attain equal dignity with men in spiritual life. Research on this so-called androcentric anthropology of the Church Fathers and its impact upon women has flourished during the past few decades. Amongst the pioneers of this type of patristic women’s studies, the Norwegian scholar Kari Elisabeth Børresen stands out as the most important. In a large number of publications she has argued that the Church Fathers managed to overcome the assumed inferiority of women in the order of creation by applying the principle of the non-gendered soul to women in the order of salvation/spirituality.\(^2\) Yet the non-gendered spiritual realm was still conceived according to the assumption that manliness equalled humanness. Even if women were equal to men within the spiritual realm, this very equality was conceived as ‘spiritual manliness’.

This ‘spiritual manliness’ was both out-weighed and preserved, however, in the Christian tradition by the continuous application of the biblical symbolism of Groom and Bride to the relationship between Christ and the Church or Soul. Mystical writings centred upon the Song of Songs tended to emphasise that both men and women in their relationship to Christ take on a ‘feminine’ role. Against this background, the construction of Christian manliness in modernity might be seen as a final flowering of a longstanding Christian pattern of interpretation, combining an ‘androcentric’ anthropology with the ‘feminisation’ of spiritual life through the symbolism of Groom and Bride.

\(^1\) Aspegren, *The Male Woman*.
\(^2\) Børresen, *From Patristics to Matristics*. 
My main purpose here is to discuss the so-called ‘new feminism’, a predominantly Catholic philosophy that emphasises the complementarities of men and women in the Roman Catholic Church. The term was originally used in Great Britain in the 1920s to distinguish new feminists, who stressed the importance of motherhood and traditionally female qualities, from suffragist feminism. Since the 1990s, the term has been used by Catholic feminist theologians responding to Pope John Paul II’s call for a ‘new feminism’, loyal to the teachings of the Catholic Church. An analysis of these texts can help shed light on the problematic relationship between traditional theological anthropology and modern thinking, which constitutes the basis of the idea of a ‘feminisation’ of religion in modern times, and also, although indirectly, the strivings for a re-masculinisation at issue in many of the contributions in this volume.

Until recently, the Roman Catholic Church defended a traditional view on gender. Motherhood was seen as the primary vocation of woman, and hence the domestic sphere the place to fulfill her task. The subordination of women was grounded in the order of creation, in accordance with the fact that Adam was created first and Eve only to be his ‘helpmate’. Thus the creation narrative of Genesis 2 took precedence over that of Genesis 1, with its rather complementary perspective on man and woman (1: 26-28). This line was corroborated by the narrative of the fall in Genesis 3, in which Eve plays the decisive role. In the first letter to the apostle Timothy (2: 11-15), this early and enduringly important tradition is summarised in the following way: ”Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing provided she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”

This was reinforced by the influence of Aristotle on Christian anthropology, and especially his theory of human conception, which emphasised the passive role of woman. The view of gender was hierarchic and androcentric, man being the norm - the human being as such - and woman the deviation, a mas occasionatum, ‘a misbegotten male’ according to Thomas Aquinas.

1 Beattie, New Catholic Feminism, Preface.
2 New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (hereafter NRSV). All biblical quotations in this chapter are taken from this translation.
3 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Ia Q 92, a 1, ad 1. This notorious statement, however, is dictated by Aristotle’s theory of conception, and refers exclusively to the conception and birth of a concrete female being: “Only as regards nature in the individual is the female something defective and manqué, For the active power in the seed of the male tends to produce something like itself, perfect in masculinity” (Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, XIII, Ia. 90-102).
TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC TEACHING ON GENDER

To some extent, though, the Christian tradition was able to relativise this strict gender hierarchy. In relation to God, men and women were assumed to be equal. Salvation, and hence baptism, Eucharist, and other sacraments, were open to all, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or social standing. This is the place where the famous words of St Paul in the letter to the Galatians (3: 28) belong: “For there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus”. Yet, this speaks of the order of salvation, not the order of creation. Without taking this distinction into account, it is impossible to understand the traditional Christian combination of equality and subordination between women and men. Christian marriage was also seen as based in principle on the free choice of a partner, while mutual fidelity in marriage tended to a sort of equality between the spouses.\(^6\) In addition to their equal standing before God in salvation, the emphasis on celibacy or virginity offered an important possibility for women to overcome subordination.

Typically, though, writings on holy women frequently emphasise the ‘male’ character of their ascetic achievements. Through abstaining from marriage and childbirth, choosing celibacy ‘for the sake of heaven’ (Matt. 19: 12), female ascetics spiritually ‘became men’.\(^7\) On the other hand, however, the androcentric norm here was balanced by the common conviction that the soul is not gendered. “Sexus non est in anima”, writes Thomas Aquinas.\(^8\) The sexual difference is bound to corporeal life and primarily motivated by the need for reproduction. Followed by Latin tradition and in contradistinction to Greek theology, Augustine assumed that gender difference had existed in paradise, and will remain for all eternity. However, there will be no concupiscence in heaven and no sexual intercourse. Human beings will become “like the angels” (Matt. 22: 30). And so sex is bound up with death and the need for reproduction, a fact that is even more obvious in the Greek tradition. This Platonising theology frequently had recourse to a spiritualised view of paradise. Originally, human beings were created with a sort of spiritual body, while God added biological corporeality in anticipation of the Fall. The entrance of death necessitates reproduction, and hence biological sex difference is introduced.\(^9\)

This is the background to the reappraisal of the Christian tradition regarding the theology of gender undertaken by the Catholic Church in recent decades. Although prepared by the development of Catholic social doctrine in the first half of the twentieth century, clear statements on gender equality are not to be found until the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Pope John XXIII in his 1963 encyclical letter Pacem in terris writes (41): “The part that women are now playing in political life is everywhere evident. ... Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be

\(^6\) Angenendt, Toleranz und Gewalt, 165-178.
\(^7\) Aspegren, The Male Woman; Vogt, “Becoming Male”.
\(^8\) Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, Suppl. 39 a.1.
\(^9\) See especially Brown, The Body and Society. See Børresen, From Patristics to Matristics, esp. 3-92.
regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons.”

Accordingly, women like men have equal rights in social and cultural life, and are called to contribute to the apostolate of all the baptised. During the twentieth century, Catholic social doctrine has turned increasingly to a human rights discourse that also encompasses women’s rights. The place of women is no longer defined by the static roles of a patriarchal society, but rather by their being acting subjects, together with men, in a changing society. However, while fully acknowledging gender equality in everyday life, the Catholic Church does not ordain women to the priesthood. This is motivated by ‘the unbroken tradition’ of male priesthood from apostolic times, but also with a metaphorical, sacramental theology of the priesthood. According to Catholic teaching, the priest represents Christ, he acts in persona Christi, as the traditional formulation goes, meaning that he acts in Christ’s place. In accordance with the letter to Ephesians (5: 21-33) Christ is seen as the bridegroom, the Church as the bride. Therefore the priest ought to be male in order to be able to represent Christ. This line of argument was developed by a document from the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in 1976, Inter Insigniores. It was further reaffirmed by John Paul II in his apostolic letter Ordinatio Sacerdotalis of 1993.

Hence, in the area of sacramental theology and church order, a patriarchal-hierarchic point of view could be said to have retained its influence and validity in Catholic teaching. My primary interest in this chapter, however, is not this fact per se. Rather, my aim is to focus on the manner in which the combination of gender equality in everyday life with the application of the bridal metaphor in the theology of the priesthood engenders a new type of reflection within theological anthropology. Additionally, facing a militant feminism even inside the Church, and especially in view of the radical constructionism of contemporary gender theory, the Catholic Church has had to develop a positive approach to gender questions. The need not only to repeat statements of the magisterium and reject demands for the ordination of women, but rather to envision a constructive theological anthropology, is increasingly keenly felt by theologians loyal to the teaching of the Church.

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10 John XIII, Pacem in Terris.
11 “Gaudium et Spes”, 8, 9 and 60; “Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People”, 9; “II. Vatikanisches Konzil, Botschaft an die Frauen”.
12 Heimbach-Steins, “Mann und Frau besitzen dieselbe Würde und sind gleichwertig”, 33; for the actual teaching of the Catholic Church on women’s rights, see Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 147, 295; and Beinert, ed., Frauenbefreiung und Kirche.
13 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, From ‘Inter Insigniores’ to ‘Ordinatio Sacerdotalis’; see also Müller, ed., Frauen in der Kirche; and Id., Der Empfänger des Weihesakraments.
THE ROMAN MAGISTERIUM AND THE GENDER QUESTION

These discussions paved the way for the new feminism. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, writes: “In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a ‘new feminism’ which rejects the temptation of imitating models of ‘male domination’, in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation.”

Proponents of this ‘new feminism’ frequently refer to this passage, yet in itself the movement originated earlier than 1995, the year of the publication of the encyclical. As a matter of fact, John Paul II/Karol Wojtyla was one of the main instigators of this kind of thought. Newly elected pope, he delivered at the general audiences a series of meditations on the human body, sexuality, and marriage, published in English as *The Theology of the Body. Human Love in the Divine Plan*. His apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women) of 1988 is also important in this regard, as are several other writings both when he was pope and as Karol Wojtyla, the young professor and bishop. John Paul II’s engagement in those issues was grounded in his interest in philosophical anthropology in combination with pastoral work.

Together with John Paul II/Karol Wojtyla, the prominent Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) and Edith Stein, the Jewish philosopher and later Carmelite nun, are of special importance when dealing with the new feminism. While von Balthasar’s theology of gender draws heavily upon the bridegroom-bride metaphor and is clearly inspired by Romanticism, the starting point for Edith Stein is the philosopher Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, which after her conversion to the Catholic Church was combined with Thomistic philosophy. In this sense, there is a clear affinity between Wojtyla and Stein, to which we will return later.

The *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and the World* of 2004 gives a good introduction to the basic traits of this new feminism. The document was issued by the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the Vatican’s department for questions of doctrine and theology. Normally, this congregation only acts defensively, reacting to what is considered false teaching. To some extent this letter follows the traditional pattern, reacting to an alleged antagonism between men and women, promoted by radical feminism.

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15 The passage from *Evangelium Vitae* is the express point of departure for the important book edited by Michele M. Schumacher, *Women in Christ*, orig. pub. as *Femmes dans le Christ*.
18 Edith Stein was executed in Auschwitz in 1942 and beatified by John Paul II in 1987. For her philosophy and reflections on gender, see von Streng, “Woman’s Threefold Vocation” and Stein, *Keine Frau ist ja nur Frau*.
19 The document is the result of a drafting process that involved a large number of theologians, bishops, and cardinals. By approving the publication of the text, the Pope acknowledges its content without being the author of the text.
The letter is also critical of the idea of a dichotomy between sex and gender, which is meant to have negative consequences on a variety of levels. Instead, it calls for active collaboration and dialogue in order to develop a more authentic relationship between men and women.

The document has three main parts, in addition to its preamble and conclusion. First, and most extended, is the treatment of ‘Basic Elements of the Biblical Vision of the Human Person’ (II). There follow two chapters on the importance of feminine values in society (III) as well as in the Church (IV). The biblical section testifies clearly to the reinterpretation of Genesis 1-3 undertaken within recent theology in regard to the traditional understanding. The main focus is on the statement in Genesis regarding the male-female relationship: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1: 27). Complementarities, not subordination, are the order of the day, as can be seen in the reinterpretation of the second creation narrative (Gen. 2: 4-25). ‘Helpmate’ is interpreted as partner, and it is underlined that the woman is of the same ‘flesh’, meaning on equal footing with the man, ontologically. Unity and communion is emphasised, through which Adam’s ‘original solitude’ is overcome. This is a prominent theme in John Paul II’s meditations - the meaning of gender difference is to be seen in overcoming the solitude of human beings. Accordingly, the traditional bridal metaphors are a basic element in this line of thought. Epithets such as ‘nuptial’ and ‘spousal’ occur frequently. Nakedness, as mentioned in Genesis 2: 25, is an indication of the communal function of gender difference. In this way, the human body, marked with the sign of masculinity or femininity, includes the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift and - by means of this gift - fulfils the meaning of his being and his existence. Continuing his commentary on these verses of Genesis, the Pope stresses that the body is “the expression of the spirit and is called, in the mystery of creation, to exist in the communion of persons in the image of God” (6).

Biological sex differentiation, then, is the basis for Catholic anthropology. Sexuality is fulfilled in the mystery of marriage (nuptial mystery). Every human being is meant as a gift to the other. In this way, human beings mirror God’s Trinitarian community. Although the Fall upsets the relationship between man and woman, as a consequence of their changed relationship to God, it does not subtract anything from the anthropology based on Genesis 1-2. The biblical vision of the human being contained in Genesis 1-3 is summarised in the following words: “Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of

20 The first three chapters of Genesis are seen as “the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology”. Letter to the Bishops, 5.
21 “He needs a helpmate who will be his partner. The term here does not refer to an inferior, but to a vital helper.” Ibid., 6.
22 See John Paul II, The Theology of the Body, 35-37 (The Meaning of Man’s Original Solitude), 42-45 (The Original Unity of Man and Woman), and 45-48 (By the Communion of Persons Man Becomes the Image of God).
23 See Ibid., 60-63, 69-72. John Paul II’s important formulation, the ’gift of self’, has a prehistory in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World “Gaudium et Spes”, 49 on married love: “A love that, bringing together the human and the divine, leads the partners to a free an mutual giving of self”.
Furthermore it is noted that sexuality is fundamental for understanding the human being, and that the capacity to love is a reflection of God’s love, and is disclosed in the spousal character of the body in which the masculinity or femininity of the person is expressed. The Fall has disturbed the balance between God and man, without changing its fundament: accordingly, the relationship is good, but wounded and in need of healing (8).

The interpretation of biblical anthropology is connected to the healing work of God throughout the history of salvation. Genesis 3: 15 marks the first point of reference. According to Christian tradition, the verse promises a saviour (Christ) who is going to be the offspring or ‘seed’ of woman. Complementarity between man and woman is not an exclusive trait of creation theology, but leads further into salvation history:

Among the many ways in which God reveals himself to his people (cf. Heb 1: 1), in keeping with a long and patient pedagogy, there is the recurring theme of the covenant between man and woman. This is paradoxical if we consider the drama recounted in Genesis and its concrete repetition in the time of the prophets, as well as the mixing of the sacred and the sexual found in the religions, which surrounded Israel. And yet this symbolism is indispensable for understanding the way in which God loves his people: God makes himself known as the Bridegroom who loves Israel his Bride (9).

Of Old Testament texts, the prophet Hosea and the Song of Songs are the most important; the latter applied to the relationship of Christ and the Church throughout the Christian tradition. Here the letter contends that the terms bridegroom and bride are much more than simple metaphors, and that this spousal language touches on the very nature of the relationship between God and his people which comes to its fulfilment in the New Testament (9). Here the document points to the importance of Mary: “On the one hand, Mary, the chosen daughter of Zion, in her femininity, sums up and transfigures the condition of Israel/Bride waiting for the day of her salvation. On the other hand, the masculinity of the Son shows how Jesus assumes in his person all that the Old Testament symbolism had applied to the love of God for his people, described as the love of a bridegroom for his bride (10).”

Amongst the many New Testament texts referred to, the letter to the Ephesians 5: 21-33 holds the primary place. The Christ-Church relationship makes marriage a sacrament that shows the extent to which the man-woman relationship is healed and sanctified through Christ and the Church (11). Yet at the same time the distinction between man and woman is reaffirmed, and, as the document concludes, “revealed as belonging ontologically to creation and destined therefore to outlast the present time” in a transfigured form (12). In this way, salvation is said to overcome the antagonism between men and women without abolishing the difference.

24 This is a direct quote from Mulieris dignitatem 6.
25 While the NRSV has “offspring”, the Vulgate has “semen”, which facilitates the traditional interpretation of the verse as prophesying Christ.
The aim of the letter is to pave the way for a collaboration between men and women. Yet, it turns out in the two subsequent sections of the letter that the emphasis is more on the role of women than on the collaboration as such. For the treatment of “feminine values in the life of society”, the expression “capacity for the other” is pivotal. It is stated that “women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other” (13). The notion of motherhood is introduced as a key concept here. Yet women’s identity is not determined by biological reproduction, the letter states. The emphasis on virginity works in the opposite direction:

The existence of the Christian vocation of virginity, radical with regard to both the Old Testament tradition and the demands made by many societies, is of the greatest importance in this regard. Virginity refutes any attempt to enclose women in mere biological destiny. Just as virginity receives from physical motherhood the insight that there is no Christian vocation except in the concrete gift of oneself to the other, so physical motherhood receives from virginity an insight into its fundamentally spiritual dimension: it is in not being content only to give physical life that the other truly comes into existence. This means that motherhood can find forms of full realisation also where there is no physical procreation (13).

It should be mentioned in this connection that even if this letter does not address the meaning of fatherhood, John Paul II does treat this theme elsewhere.26 Yet, like the letter, the Pope does not really overcome the concentration on women and motherhood. The complementary biblical anthropology conceived of in the first section of the letter gives way to an emphasis on motherhood in the second section. Woman, it is said, has a unique role to play in all aspects of family and life concerning relationships and care. Yet, having thus endorsed a sort of ‘separate spheres ideology’, the letter interestingly makes an important reservation. Female values, it states, are basically human values:

It is only because women are more immediately attuned to these values that they are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values. But, in the final analysis, every human being, man or woman, is destined to be ‘for the other’. In this perspective, that which is called ‘femininity’ is more than simply an attribute of the female sex. The word designates indeed the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other (14).

The document thus aims to underscore the shared humanity of men and women, overcoming the antagonism between them. Promoting the rights of women in society amounts to promoting human values, which in turn are being rediscovered by the agency of women (14). Coming to ‘feminine values in the life of the Church’ (IV), the letter underlines even more the specific role of women: “In the Church, woman as

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26 See Delaney, *A Theology of Fatherhood in the Thought of Karol Wojtyla*. 
‘sign’ is more than ever central and fruitful, following as it does from the very identity of the Church, as received from God and accepted in faith. It is this ‘mystical’ identity, profound and essential, which needs to be kept in mind when reflecting on the respective roles of men and women in the Church (15).” In this section of the document a metaphorical, mystical, and sacramental language is used. Christ is the Bridegroom and the Church his Bride, and hence Mary’s role as the model for the Church is underlined. Women are called on to be unique examples and witnesses for all Christians of how the Bride is to respond in love to the love of the Bridegroom (16).

According to this letter, and to Catholic teaching generally, while women have the same rights as men in everyday life, their special contribution stems from their capacity to give life. This natural capacity, which translates into human and spiritual values, is expressly connected to an anthropology of complementarities, entailing the equality of women and men in an order characterised by relationality. Women, though, in a certain sense represent human values more than men do. The bridal metaphors taken from Scripture are developed, without emphasising the traditional subordination of the bride in human relationships. Subordination, however, is naturally implied in the relationship between God/Christ the Bridegroom and human beings/the Church-Bride. In the order of creation, traditional gender hierarchy is abolished. The use of bridal metaphors in this general anthropology instead aims at underscoring sex difference as a fundamental fact. Echoing John Paul II, sexuality is interpreted as a mutual ‘gift of self’. Gender complementarity further, is preserved in salvation and church life, and the difference between the two sexes is affirmed and exalted through marriage as a sacrament. Virginity, on the other hand, points to the spiritualisation of gender relations that starts here and will only be fulfilled in heaven. Femininity and female values are emphasised in the traditional metaphor of the Church as a woman, and by pointing to Mary as the (female) model for both women and men. In a spiritual sense, every Christian is called on to ‘become a woman’. In Mulieris dignitatem John Paul II writes “that as members of the Church, men too are included in the concept of ‘Bride’”. Yet to be consistently applied, the analogy of spousal love, according to this teaching, requires male priests. The connection between priesthood and the central position of the Eucharist in Catholic understanding is seen in this perspective:

Since Christ, in instituting the Eucharist, linked it in such an explicit way to the priestly service of the Apostles, it is legitimate to conclude that he thereby wished to express the relationship between man and woman, between what is ‘feminine’ and what is ‘masculine’. It is a relationship willed by God both in the mystery of creation and in the mystery of Redemption. It is the Eucharist above all that expresses the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom towards the Church the Bride. This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts ‘in persona Christi’, is performed by a man.28

28 Mulieris dignitatem 26.
The sacrificial nature of the Eucharist and the nuptial character of the church are thus connected with a view of priesthood as essentially masculine, which seems to make female ordination impossible.

## THE NEW CATHOLIC FEMINISM
### SOME THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

It is against the background of this magisterial teaching that any discussion and analysis of works representing the ‘new Catholic feminism’ must be set. Thus far there have been only a few attempts to engage with this new trend from a critical perspective. The most ambitious is the book *New Catholic Feminism. Theology and Theory*, in which the theologian Tina Beattie undertakes a thorough analysis of the gender theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar. Otherwise, established feminist theology almost completely ignores the Catholic renewal with regard to gender issues, while naturally the new Catholic feminists have a certain interest in criticising secular feminism and established feminist theology in order to set out the characteristics of their own position.29 Understandably enough, the latter perceive secular feminism and its theological followers as antagonists in the battle over the ‘right’ interpretation of gender. At the same time, the new feminists clearly acknowledge the relevance of the feminist critique of patriarchy.30 Parallel to this awakening on gender issues in conservative Catholic circles, there has been a renewal underway in Anglo-Saxon feminist theology, with theological criticism of secular feminism and a return to the Christian tradition as a resource for feminist theology.31 In this situation, I think it is worthwhile introducing at least some of the theses and insights of new Catholic feminism into the discussion.

First of all, it is important to underscore the extent to which new Catholic feminism, and hence the present teaching of the Catholic Church, takes gender issues seriously. In less than fifty years, Church teaching has shifted focus from the exclusive emphasis on women’s subordination as spouses and mothers to women’s equality with men in all parts of life. Such polemics against feminism as exist have softened in tone. The reactive attitude towards gender issues is little by little being substituted by a proactive one. Interestingly, Tina Beattie, herself a Catholic and a feminist, contends that secular feminists should not reject ‘Vatican-style feminism’ outright. Commenting on the *Letter to the Bishops* summarised above, she writes: “There is much here that resonates with feminist thinking, particularly the excellent section on work and family.”32 Further, she suspects that the majority of feminists agree that women are more relational than men, and that this relationality is “a better model of humanity than the masculine individualism of modern society”.

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30 See Schumacher, “The Nature of Nature in Feminism”.
31 Most important is Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*.
32 Beattie, “Feminism, Vatican-style”. 
Tina Beattie further contends that the feminist theological vision stands in need of revitalisation since “Western feminist theologians to a large extent have remained captive to a highly politicised and often agnostic theology”. Beattie argues that this new Catholic interest in gender issues, although basically bound to a traditional androcentric perspective and hence focused mostly on the role of women, unavoidably leads to attentiveness to the conceptual constructs that are masculinity and femininity. The ‘gender fluidity’ that Tina Beattie observes in the Catholic tradition is not expressly acknowledged by official Church teaching or the new Catholic feminists. It seems rather to be suppressed, at least on the surface, by an affirmation of the order of creation and natural law as normative for sex and gender in a Catholic understanding. Pope Benedict XVI in his Christmas speech to members of the Roman Curia in 2008 stated that “What is often expressed and understood by the term ‘gender’ ultimately ends up being man’s attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator.” Obviously, the Pope here aimed at confirming a theology of creation that entails a clear assumption of gender difference in an essentialist sense. ‘Essentialism’ is an equally prominent feature of the new catholic feminism. Yet on closer examination, the metaphorical theological language used in reflecting on the role of men and women in Church and salvation yields to a highly fluid understanding of gender. As will become clear, there are conflicting tendencies in this way of thinking. The move to reflect constructively on gender issues has its ramifications.

As already noted, the traditional metaphor on Christ as bridegroom and the Church as bride plays an important role in the new feminism, and not only as an argument against the ordination of women. Rather, the covenant between God and Israel, and hence the relationship between God and Creation or Christ and the soul, is exclusively characterised as a ‘nuptial/spousal’ relationship. This seems to underscore a sort of gender essentialism as the necessary basis for this metaphorical language. This gender essentialism supposedly should be preserved throughout the process, because it mirrors God’s relation to Creation and Christ’s to the Church. Yet in Christian tradition the fatherhood of God should not be taken literally. God has no gender, and the maleness of Christ was never emphasised at the expense of his full humanity. The extent to which these traditional metaphors are bound to gender essentialism is therefore an open question. The contention of Tina Beattie, amongst others, is that they are not, and that the stress should be on the gendering of language and symbols, not on the biological sex of the body. In her book New Catholic Feminism, Beattie severely criticises Hans Urs von Balohm for emphasising this gendered language to the extent of making God masculine, or rather ‘super masculine’. The metaphors are frozen into gender stereotypes that tend to preserve the subordination of women, notwithstanding the emphasis on the equal dignity between the sexes emanating

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33 Id., New Catholic Feminism, 3. This critique is shared by Sarah Coakley, who in her Powers and Submissions engages critically with prominent feminists such as Judith Butler.
34 Beattie, New Catholic Feminism, 11.
35 For ‘gender fluidity’ in the Christian tradition, see Coakley, Powers and Submissions.
36 Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Members of the Roman Curia.
37 Ibid.
38 Beattie, “Insight beyond Sight”.
from their creation in the image of God. Although one can argue about the extent to which von Balthasar’s theology in this regard has had a general influence on the new feminists, there is clearly a problem here.

What does it mean exactly that the metaphors bridegroom and bride as used in Christian tradition ‘are much more than simple metaphors’? Certainly, their dominance as metaphors in Christian tradition cannot be questioned, and to contend they have been undeniably compromised by their patriarchal use might be an option for liberal feminists, but this is not an option in a gender theology that aims at a constructive repossession of Christian tradition. The language of dependence on God/Christ by Creation/soul/Church that those metaphors once used to express is not negotiable. Yet, the question remains of the extent to which the ‘much more than simple metaphors’ imply a specific definition of gender, and hence of the relationships of sex and gender. Before listening to the new feminists on this point, we must turn to the ‘gender fluidity’ in their use of those metaphors.

The ‘nuptial’ relationship of the Church to Christ its bridegroom finds its purest expression in Mary. Like Mary, the Church should be the listening and receptive party in the relationship. Even if this attitude is characterised as specifically feminine, both men and women are called on to share in it. Men and women together make up the bride of Christ, which means that men in this regard are called to ‘femininity’ no less than women. What is regarded as specifically feminine turns out to be a general characteristic of humankind. Further, while male priests acting in persona Christi in a sense represent the ‘maleness of Christ’, his being the bridegroom, all other men in the Church play the role of woman in relation to Christ, including the priest when acting in persona ecclesiae, the representative of the Church. All this testifies to a certain fluidity in the use of gender metaphors in traditional language. The emphasis on virginity as a vocation for women and men further promotes this fluidity. In answering the call to be celibate ‘for the sake of heaven’, men in a radical sense become what all the baptised are called to be - brides of Christ. The crossing of gender boundaries is obvious here. What is more, the interpretation of virginity as spiritual motherhood both confirms and relativises the importance of physical motherhood, and thus overcomes a certain type of gender stereotype. Those traits of traditional metaphorical language, as used and confirmed by the new feminists, clearly balance the essentialism of this new trend. Taken together, the gender essentialism of the new feminists and the simultaneous affirmation of the fluid bridegroom-bride metaphors, according to Tina Beattie, constitute “a highly ambiguous understanding of the relationship between biological sex and spiritual gender”.

39 Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, esp. ch. 6; cf. Coakley, “In Persona Christi”. Indeed, von Balthasar seems to overstate the meaning of those traditional metaphors, and to make the description of the relationship between God and Creation dependent on certain gender concepts. The most characteristic parts of von Balthasar’s writings in this connection are *Theodramatik. II: Die Personen des Spiels, Teil 1: Der Mensch in Gott*, 334-350 (“Mann und Frau”); *Teil 2: Die Personen in Christus*, 260-268 (“Die Frau als Antwort”); and “Frauenpriestertum”; see also Crammer, “One sex or two?”.


41 Id., “In Persona Christi”.

42 Beattie, “Feminism, Vatican-style”.
How then do the new Catholic feminists conceive the relationship between sex and gender? Although there is no fully worked out answer to this question, in responding to mainstream feminism the new feminists are addressing the distinction between sex and gender in a new way. Starting with the critique of the sharp dichotomy between sex and gender in secular feminism, Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkowitz contends that secular feminists are trapped in the very dualism between nature and culture (nature and nurture) or body and soul (reason and spirit) that the feminist critique of patriarchy aimed at overcoming. By denying that there is any basis in nature for women being women, the possibility of an ontology or phenomenology is rejected outright. She further criticises the disengagement from the body, which “takes place not only in the male-dominated history of philosophy, but also within contemporary deconstructionalism and the philosophical feminism that employs the postmodern framework”. Hence the critique of secular feminism is as much a philosophical as a theological task.

Michele Schumacher argues along the same lines. In its criticism of the dualistic concept of nature as being characteristic of ‘androcentric logics’, feminism falls prey to the same mentality, she contends. It has, she writes, “accepted the ‘patriarchal’ division of nature and culture which denies nature of its traditional metaphysical dimension”. Understanding gender as based almost exclusively on history and culture results in “a radical questioning of the relation between biology and gender, of course, but even of biology as such”. The concept of nature is changed, according to Schumacher. The argumentation has “thus evolved from the social construction of gender to the social construction of nature. ... The delicate balance between nature and nurture ... is further threatened ... by feminism’s insistence upon the overbearing power of culture.”

This severe criticism of gender constructivism does not imply its total rejection, although Schumacher emphasises that the assumption that there is no ‘real’ relationship between nature and gender implies the same dualistic trap that many contemporary Western feminists purport to deny, namely that “the social is at odds with the natural, the human with the animal”.

Here I would like to draw attention to the concessions to gender constructivism implied in the argumentation propounded by Schumacher and other proponents of the new feminism. Yet it is important to realise that the thrust of the argument is to defend nature as created by God, not by human beings. Whatever human beings...
contribute to the fashioning of gender through history and culture, the firm conviction behind the new Catholic feminism is that there is still an order of Creation to be respected, or as it might be a ‘message’ to be listened to.

While sharing to some extent this concern of the new feminists, Beattie carefully avoids an appeal to the order of Creation. Steering a course between gender essentialism and the other extreme, she emphasises the revelational character of the human body and its sacramental importance. She further concurs in some measure with Schumacher’s critique of feminism as dismissive of nature, although she criticises her selective engagement with feminist thinkers and her uncritical allegiance to neo-orthodox Catholicism. Referring to the Catholic theologian Nancy Dallavalle, Beattie concludes that the official Catholic interpretation of the significance of the sexual body invites feminist reflection. She further “insists that the development of a critical essentialism is a task of Catholic theology”.50 Beattie and Dallavalle share the concern of the new feminists with discovering the meaning of the (sexual) body for anthropology. The body is not simply something to be constructed and ‘performed’ linguistically; it has a reality of its own that is a source of revelation, albeit inaccessible except through “an interpretative act by creation on creation”.51

In this connection Beattie addresses the theology of John Paul II - in which the significance of the body is to be a ‘gift of self’ - and characterises it as both “promising and problematic for feminist theology”.52 Nevertheless, Beattie affirms the value of John Paul II’s theology of the body with its recovery of the dignity of the self as the gift of God, made in the image of God, which could offer feminist theology “a new model of relationality that is not parasitic upon the autonomous subjectivities of modernity, nor prey to the many forms of subordinationism and subjugation which haunt the Christian theology of woman”.53 Setting aside Beattie’s critique of the Church’s highly conservative understanding of marriage, procreation, and motherhood, which clearly distinguishes her from the new Catholic feminists, they otherwise have much in common. Beattie aims at overcoming ‘modernity’s literalisms’, and she seeks a refuguration of knowledge, “through a reopening of the theological horizons beyond metaphysics and beyond modernism”.54 As is obvious, the new Catholic feminism does not entail a simple reaffirmation of traditional gender theology, and is perhaps better seen as a refuguration of knowledge with special regard to gender. In this sense it is also an attempt to overcome modernism, yet in a different sense from Beattie, and definitely not by going beyond metaphysics.55

In sum, the changes brought about in the teaching of the Catholic Church with regard to women oblige the new feminists to develop a theological and philosophical anthropology that accords with those changes. By abandoning the subordination...
of women and turning to an anthropology of complementarities between men and women, the new feminists address the issue of gender in a new way. Pre-modern Christian tradition understood the sexual difference as almost exclusively motivated by reproduction: the soul was generally assumed to be ‘non-gendered’; the statement in Galatians 3: 28 was interpreted as meaning that gender has no implications for salvation. In a sense, this is still the teaching of the Catholic Church, meaning that salvation is open to all human beings without regard to gender, ethnicity, class, or the like. Yet the traditional conclusion that gender difference thus does not impact on spiritual life is now on the wane. Human beings are created as images of God, and this image is gendered. Man and woman complement each other as image of God, in accordance with Genesis 1: 28. An individual human being - male or female - is not regarded as incomplete, though, even if the foil of the other gender more fully reveals the meaning of being created in the image of God. The *imago Dei* is a relational concept that mirrors the Triune communion in God. However, this necessarily makes gender more important to spiritual life. The gendered image of God acquires a certain importance for salvation.

What does this really mean? Should we turn around Thomas Aquinas’ formulation and state “sexus est etiam in anima”? As we will see, the new feminists are working in this direction. Yet even if sex and gender depend exclusively on the body, gender derives increased importance from the positive statement that gender difference is preserved in eternal life. There will be a discernible bodily difference between the sexes in heaven, albeit a spiritualised difference. By affirming this, Church teaching and the new feminists emphatically follow the Latin rather than the Platonising Greek tradition. Generally speaking, the body and corporeality are accorded greater importance by the new feminists than by the earlier tradition. Body, sex, and gender are here exalted to such an extent that it insists on a new philosophical and theological anthropology.

The problem to be solved by this new anthropology can be formulated thus. While sharing with contemporary feminism and philosophy the emphasis on relationships and relationality, the new feminists are unwilling to separate relationality from a realistic epistemology, contending that relationality is grounded in nature. More concretely, the sexed body is the foundation of relationality, in showing that man and woman are ‘gifts of self’ to each other. That this gift of self should transcend sexual relationships is equally obvious, and not only within a specific relationship between a man and a woman. Celibacy just as much as marriage may be seen as a gift of self. The sexed body is clearly the foundation, but gender is something to be configured on a higher level.

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KAROL WOJTYLA AND EDITH STEIN
TWO TREND-SETTERS

To justify this close connection between sex and gender, the Romantic gender stereotypes of Hans Urs von Balthasar are of less importance than the philosophical approach of thinkers such as Edith Stein and Karol Wojtyla.\(^{57}\) That Stein was a disciple of Edmund Husserl and that Wojtyla’s philosophy was heavily influenced by Max Scheler are well known. Yet both thinkers consciously linked up with Thomist philosophy in their efforts to develop an adequate anthropology.

In her essay “Woman’s Threefold Vocation according to Edith Stein”, Sibylle von Streng characterises Stein as ‘strongly essentialist’, pointing to the strong Thomistic influence in her anthropology. Body, soul, and spirit are “real, concrete components of the human person”, according to Stein. However, experience in the form of phenomenological intuition makes up a second important source of her thinking.\(^{58}\) For Stein, it is experience that brings to light the existence of a corporeal and personal ‘I’, and presents us with a very particular distinction between sexes. Stein’s answer to the question of the region of being in which the apparent type difference between man and woman originates goes beyond classical Christian anthropology. According to her, the sex difference cannot be thought of as confined to the bodily sphere, for it also affects the spiritual; she contends that the “relationship of soul and body is different in man and woman”, and that the soul-body relationship is lived more intimately in a woman than in a man.\(^{59}\)

To understand this very pronounced separate spheres ideology, one should keep in mind that Stein was writing in the 1920s and 1930s. The heavy emphasis on the typically female experience should be viewed in the context of an emerging attention to women’s role in everyday life by Catholic thinkers. Moreover, the innovative idea of a ‘feminine soul’ paradoxically has much to do with Stein’s use of Thomist philosophy. Given that the soul is the form of the body, in combination with the abandonment of androcentric anthropology in favour of complementarities, this might be a consistent development of the assumed relationship between body and soul.\(^{60}\) Yet Stein’s anthropology does not require that we should now reckon with two species of human beings. Human nature is still considered one, but has both a specific masculine-feminine and an individual-personal expression. Typically, Edith Stein tries to hold together what she intuitively felt was being rent asunder: nature and culture, sex and gender. This still leaves Stein an author of importance for the new Catholic feminists, although the reception of her thought has not been without its reservations.\(^{61}\)

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\(^{57}\) This conclusion can be drawn from the volume Schumacher, ed., *Women in Christ*.

\(^{58}\) On Stein’s phenomenological method, see in particular von Streng, “Woman’s Threefold Vocation”, 106.

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 107-109, quoting Stein, “Problems of Women’s Education”.

\(^{60}\) See further von Streng, “Woman’s Threefold Vocation”, 111-113 on Stein’s use of the Thomistic term ‘substantial form’.

\(^{61}\) See Ibid., 137-138.
More influential, however, is the thought of John Paul II. Here also one has to face the fundamental differences between John Paul II’s Thomistic personalism and the philosophical assumptions of mainstream gender studies in Western academia. Although clearly inspired by twentieth-century phenomenology, John Paul II grounds his philosophy in Thomism. Consequently, his philosophical anthropology does not take consciousness as its point of departure, but rather builds upon a hylomorphic view of human beings. Body and soul belong closely together, the soul being the (substantial) form of the body. This accords high importance to the corporeal aspect of the human condition, excluding the possibility that the body is understood and treated as an external instrument of the soul. Rather, the soul as form makes bodily characteristics important for the entire human being; hence also the sexed body has an impact on the soul. Since this is the form of the body, gender must be manifested in the soul one way or the other. A gendered soul in the ontological sense would threaten the unity of the human species, however, and thus the general salvific importance of Christ’s human nature.

Like Stein, though, John Paul II not only distinguishes body and soul-spirit in human beings, but also focuses on the concept of person. This enables him to state that “sex ... is in a sense, ‘a constituent part of the person’ (not just ‘an attribute of the person’)”. Thus one could conclude that according to John Paul II, gender is essential to personhood while remaining accidental to human nature. In all cases, John Paul II is firm in his belief that the sexual characteristics of the body are not accidental or peripheral to the identity of human beings. His *Theology of the Body* is an extended and eloquent argument, based on his earlier philosophical writings, in favour of a view that firmly grounds gender in the fact of being created as male and female. To dichotomise sex and gender or to relativise the male-female duality or complementarities is clearly not an option for him. Yet the distinction between sex and gender does not seem foreign to his thought - otherwise sex would determine everything in his anthropology, which is clearly not the case. Rather, while gender is inextricably bound to male-female sex as a point of departure, it transcends sex without abolishing it. The relation between sex and gender should be understood here as dynamic in the same sense as the relationship between body and (spiritual) soul.

**CONCLUSIONS**

By way of conclusion, I would like to underscore the central points in this preliminary discussion of the new Catholic feminism. First of all, with the exception of the non-ordination of women, the Catholic Church has fully acknowledged the equality of men and women in society, culture, and Church. Secondly, this has led to a renewal of theological anthropology or gender theology from a Catholic perspective. Thirdly, this gender theology does not reject gender constructionism out of hand. Admittedly,

62 Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła*.
63 See Wojtyła, *Person and Community*, esp. 165-176.
65 For this distinction, see Grabowski, “The Status of the Sexual Good”.
the new feminists do not share the philosophical presuppositions of mainstream gender studies, and instead a realistic epistemology and a Thomistic, phenomenological philosophy are proving pivotal. The Catholic Church does not compromise its beliefs in an order of Creation and natural law. The new feminists base their arguments on a form of philosophy that is widely taught at Catholic philosophical and theological schools around the world. In my understanding, the (im)possibility of a dialogue between Catholic feminism and secular gender studies therefore comes to grief in the chasm dividing two different philosophies and world-views rather than in the assumed preservation of certain gender stereotypes by the Catholic Church.66

As a fourth point, however, I would like to refer to the existence of feminist theologians who differ from ‘traditional’ feminist theology and to some extent bridge the gap between secular feminism and the new Catholic feminists. The latter would certainly profit from a dialogue with Tina Beattie, Sarah Coakley, and Nancy Dallalvalle, amongst others.67 In terms of the retrieval of the Christian mystical tradition for feminist theology, and the emphasis on gender fluidity in traditional mystical and nuptial language, there might be more in common than appears in a superficial comparison. Yet the crucial issue, of course, is the different philosophical assumptions that may divide the new Catholic feminists from this new trend in feminist theology.

Last but not least, the gender stereotypes basic to modernity in the period on which this project on ‘Christian Manliness’ focuses do not seem to be important to new Catholic feminism. Rather, while taking the bodily-grounded sex difference as its given and non-negotiable point of departure, these feminists easily transcend the gender stereotypes that flow from the very same assumption into bourgeois modernity. In linking up with traditional bridegroom-bride metaphors and emphasising the ‘genius of woman’ there is no ambition to work out what characterises ‘manliness’ in contradistinction to the female. Even if one could find a lingering androcentrism in this focus on women, the result is rather an emphasis on female virtues as being potentially human. Still, the association of the male with Christ and God in the use of the traditional metaphors seems to limit this gender fluidity, restricting the application of the mutuality and complementarities of the sexes that are basic to this anthropology. Yet given that ‘manliness’ or male gender in the Christian tradition does not characterise God in any ontological sense, it might be possible to overcome this tension without doing away with traditional metaphors.

66 “Towards a New Feminism”.
67 See also Soskice, The Kindness of God, esp. ch. 2.