

Theological Trends

THE LENSES OF GENDER¹

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THE HEATED DEBATES ABOUT THE EQUALITY or inequality of the sexes, and their application to theological questions such as the role of women in ministry, have been transformed in the light of newer perspectives on gender and human subjectivity. A traditional dualistic view saw men and women as possessing male or female bodies, but sexless, rational souls. Though Christian anthropology understood men and women as sharing a common human nature, female sexuality and a woman's way of being human posed endless problems about her ability to mirror the fullness of the nature she possessed. The template of normative humanity was the man; measured against this, a woman was usually seen to possess humanity in a derivative, subordinate or defective way. Arguments about the 'special nature of women' were, and still are, hotly debated.² These are really arguments about what it is to be fully human and how to find language which might incorporate concepts of both equality and difference between the sexes.

However, these usually adversarial debates have been transformed by the more inclusive discourse of gender, by the recognition that all human life and experience is gendered. This discourse has been stimulated by research and discussion within the human and social sciences, especially in anthropology, biology and psychoanalysis, each of which has an interest in how gender is constructed. Above all, gender studies have been strongly influenced by women's studies and the broad movement to retrieve women's history and experience. In general theology, spirituality and pastoral practice have been slow to incorporate insights from other disciplines, and arguments are used, or positions are held, which have been discredited or critically reassessed in non-ecclesial circles. This article will highlight some of the main issues in a growth area of human reflection which deserves the closest attention of those interested in the study of religion and in the construction of a religious identity within the Christian tradition.

Women's studies, feminist studies, gender studies

Before critically examining the key question of the distinction between sex (supposedly given by nature) and gender (supposedly acquired by culture), it may be helpful to outline the shift from women's studies through feminist studies to gender studies, and why many find the latter more inclusive and less threatening. From the early 1970s, new methods in historical scholarship, especially from the French *Annales* school, led to the development of 'history from below', history in terms of the lives of the majority of ordinary people.

Its subject matter included social and cultural factors previously overlooked in traditional history: attitudes to family, kinship, sexuality, birth, childhood, infanticide. The hidden history of most women, who had been assigned to the unrecorded work of reproduction and repetitious daily domestic tasks, began to emerge. Historical anthropologists became interested in the study of the family and of sexual roles in all cultures, in differing approaches to the human body, and in questions relating to gender and power. Feminist historians devised new courses to raise women's awareness of themselves as active agents, not merely passive spectators, within the human story. This was a stage of retrieval, of making women visible where they had previously been invisible or ignored.

Once the material had been amassed, the next task was to assess it critically. There was a danger that women's history could become just an interesting chapter added on to traditional historical narratives. Feminist historians, however, challenged the content, structure and assumptions of all such narratives, and feminist scholarship undertook a radical reassessment of western culture, history and literature. Scholars such as Gerda Lerner and Joan Scott in North America, and Michelle Perrot and Arlette Farge in France, began to ask why and how inequality between the sexes, and the asymmetry of their social and political roles, had first emerged. Lerner's *The creation of patriarchy* (1986) and *The creation of feminist consciousness* (1993) uncovered the origins and sources of women's subordination, of men's sexual and bodily control over women, and of the consequent social constructions of gender identity.³

In time the growth of womanist history, giving voice to the experience of Third World women, made feminist scholars more aware of the tendency of privileged white women to interpret all women's experience in terms of their own, screening out the wide and rich variations between differing cultures and historical periods. To appeal to some universal 'woman's experience' was seen to be as flawed as the previous appeal to a universal man's experience had been. Human experience varies as much within the sexes as between the sexes.

A period of retrieval (stage one) was followed by a period of critical deconstruction (stage two), moving into a period of the reconstruction of all reality from a feminist perspective (stage three). Though critical feminist deconstruction is certainly valid in its own terms, and though it needs to be continued in order for centuries of imbalance to be redressed, such work could leave women's or feminist studies in their own academic ghetto. If women were invisible in traditional history, men were certainly invisible in critical feminism. However, men and women do not live in two separate, watertight departments of history, but rather in varying modes of reciprocity. What was needed, therefore, was a study of the history of relationships between the sexes: the gendering of historical understanding. 'Just as, since Marx, no study of a historical situation is complete without economic analysis, the suggestion is that no historical study is complete without gender analysis.'⁴

Women's hidden experience can be legitimately retrieved in its own right: an example is the moving study of the trousseau in French social custom, as a symbol of the 'long history between mother and daughter', and the gradual but costly acquisition of a young woman's contribution to her future home.⁵ Equally valid is the study of the concealment of male suffering, of how men experienced cultures in which only women could express grief openly. Men too need to be brought openly into a sex-differentiated history. 'What we must do is to identify the systems of representation, the network of fears, the kernel of anxiety that govern male language and behaviour.'⁶ Masculinity as well as femininity has been socially constructed, with consequences for both sexes.

Women's studies pointed towards a parallel need for men's studies, with the result that there are now two distinct but related areas linked by the title 'gender studies'. The concept of gender studies seemed less threatening and more inclusive than feminist studies, and this may partly account for its recent acceptance in the academic and publishing world. But the inclusion of men does not necessarily mean the exclusion of a feminist critical agenda. As Mary Daly puts it, gender studies must not be allowed to become 'blender studies', presenting us 'with an illusion of symmetry when we experience sexual difference as a powerful factor of dissymmetry in everyday life'.⁷ With this important caveat, the concept of genderedness should nevertheless be welcomed as 'an important new insight of feminism, not derived from earlier philosophical positions'.⁸ Moreover, attention to the gender constructs and representations that shape popular thinking has particular relevance for religion, theology and spirituality.

The sex-gender debate

In ordinary everyday language the tendency to speak of 'the opposite sex' suggests male and female as 'inherent opposites rather than as persons with statistically overlapping qualities who share a common humanity'.⁹ Traditionally sexual difference was linked to some kind of biological determinism: sex was a factor 'given' at conception and 'biology was destiny'. However 'gender theorists' in the Anglo-American tradition suggested that, while sex (male or female) is biologically determined, gender, the expression of masculinity and femininity, has been socially and culturally determined. Different societies have constructed different role expectations for men and women, related to strategies of survival, division of labour and symbolic representations of power. There are some societies where women, not men, labour in the fields, or where inheritance comes through the female, not the male, line of descent. Gender theorists tended to focus on social and historical forces to explain difference between the sexes; 'culture' rather than 'nature' was at the root of discriminatory practice. They sought to redress injustice and imbalance by political action to gain equal rights for women.

The validity of the sex-gender distinction, accepted since the 1970s, is now, however, under attack from several quarters. The 'sexual difference' theorists of the French/European tradition have pointed out that the distinction only

makes sense in an English-speaking cultural context. The French cognate of 'gender' – *le genre* – can be used to refer to humanity as a whole – '*le genre humain*'.¹⁰ The French language is more 'sexuate', attributing the masculine or feminine article to nouns and objects which are not necessarily male or female. The words 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' are preferred to the more neutral 'gender'. Some even suggested that gender was a 'fig leaf' used by those who were uncomfortable with sexuate modes of speech.

It is of interest to note that the word sexuality does not appear in the documents of the Second Vatican Council or in post-conciliar teachings before 1981. Though slow to begin, the Church is now well on its way to developing a theology of sexuality 'as the core characteristic of human beings that leads us out of ourselves and into relationship with each other'.¹¹ A theology of sexuality (as distinct from sex) is slowly coming to accept the existence of both homosexual and heterosexual orientations, as also the fact that celibacy is a way of being sexual. A recognition of the human gift of sexuality, and the search for ways to deal creatively with it, are essential aspects of human and spiritual growth and integrity. 'Writing the body' is also a first and essential step towards the possibility of gender analysis, or how the scripts and stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are learned and upheld by social institutions such as family, education and religion. Gender is now seen as a fundamental form of social relationships. It is fluid, complex and in constant transition, not ontologically 'given' or biologically determined.

Meanwhile genetic research indicates that the human foetus does not exhibit distinctive sexual features until six weeks after conception, when the process of differentiation begins. Sex is not so much 'given' at conception, as acquired through complex genetic processes during the period of gestation. Sexual difference appears much less as something bi-polar than as 'a series of graduations, with some individuals experiencing transsexualism'.¹² Meanwhile gender is acquired through a number of influences, conscious and unconscious. Each society has its own 'script' for the acquisition of gender roles, and many cultures recognize that 'gender may be adopted, changed or assumed in certain circumstances'.¹³ We need to recognize the diversity and plasticity of human nature. The hard lines of the sex–gender distinction give way to a much more complex series of interactive processes, before and after birth, by which a human person acquires self-identity and subjectivity.

The lenses of gender

One of the most helpful recent contributions to the sex–gender discussion has been that of Sandra Lipsitz Bem. In *The lenses of gender*¹⁴ she suggests that most cultures look at male and female gender through one or more 'lenses'. The first is that of polarization, which maximizes the differences between men and women on the ground that their genetic structure and experiences of human living literally set them poles apart. All 'complementary but different' theories fall within this category, though some versions may

be more gently constructed than others. The second lens is that of androcentrism, which sees men as the dominant sex, inherently superior, and exemplifying the normative way of being human. Woman thus appears as the problematic 'other', whose humanity cannot (usually) be denied, but cannot be fully affirmed either. The third lens is that of biological essentialism: male-female differences are natural, and so essentially and ontologically grounded.

Bem argues that we must become aware of these 'lenses' through which we look at human experience and from which we construct our cultural discourses of gender. We must strive for a critical awareness of how these lenses shape our perceptions, analyze how they are used to legitimate sexual discrimination and inequality, and search for other, more adequate lenses through which to view and understand our shared humanity in its two gendered modes.

Each of the lenses named by Bem highlights a difference between the sexes, whether natural, cultural or biological. By contrast, most feminist discourse, notably Anglo-American social and political feminism, highlights the equality between the sexes and downplays the difference. There is a danger that this way of viewing the sexes could come close to a unisex or androgynous view of human nature in which male and female embrace what belongs to the other and lose any distinctive identity. Attempts at a gender-free language in liturgy or common discourse often screen out the richness and diversity of human life for the sake of political correctness. The result is a blandness and uniformity which is limiting and uninspiring. It should be possible to avoid insensitivity and to use gender-inclusive language without resorting to banality. Equality of rights need not mean uniformity or identity.

More recent French philosophical feminism, with an interest in psychoanalysis and symbolic representation rather than socio-political issues, asks the question 'equal to whom?',¹⁵ thereby once again focusing on difference. If women are equal to men, what difference does their presence bring? Are there special gifts, insights or perspectives which women and men may bring to the practice of the law or medicine or any of the professions? Are these gifts innate or culturally acquired? But those who focus on difference and minimize equality face other dangers. Their viewpoint seems to be closely related to a form of biological essentialism. More problematically, in the history of (western) philosophy and political thought, 'difference' has almost always been used to denote an otherness which implies inferiority: to be less than, or of less worth. Difference has been colonized by power relations (Simone de Beauvoir). The white man looked down on the coloured man because he was 'different', not one of the ruling race. The stranger, the foreigner, the servant, the woman, were excluded from 'belonging' to a superior and more powerful dominant group. For postmodern thinkers, difference has to be redeemed from racism, sexism and classism, but still celebrated. However, French philosophical feminists who want to celebrate women's difference have yet to persuade Anglo-American feminists that this is not a betrayal of their mutual cause.

Both have to explore what it means to be equal *and* different, while avoiding the impasse of equal *but* different.

The gendering of religious studies and theology

The 'gendering' of religious studies and theology has exposed and discredited a theology of the subordination or inferiority of women. In official ecclesial discourse it is giving way to a new theology of the 'eternal feminine'. The preferred language of those in the churches opposed to radical or liberal feminism is that of complementarity between the sexes, seen as part of God's ordering of creation. The writings of Pope John Paul II and official Roman Catholic Church documents now reflect the respect and honour due to women, who have a 'special role' within the Church. Angela Tilby has observed that John Paul II,

assumes, when he speaks and writes of the human person, that the template of humanity is Christ, and that to see human beings in any other way is to distort them. The only problem is that the Pope cannot quite make sense of *women* within this Christ-centred template. He seems to assume, though he cannot quite say so, that their humanity is of another kind. Theandric perhaps, yet not quite within the template of Christ, since, unlike men, they cannot image Christ through the ministerial priesthood.¹⁶

John Paul II and many others have been influenced by the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), who has drawn attention to the rich symbolism of the binary gender system, and to its expression in biblical, patristic and traditional theologies and spiritualities. Such ideas are attracting many theological writers, including women scholars from the North American scene,¹⁷ who would argue that men and women are both made in the image of God but have complementary roles to play in embodying that image. God is 'male' to creation; creation is 'feminine', receptive to God's creative activity. The covenant between God and his people is a 'nuptial' relationship, as is that of Christ to his body the Church (Eph 5). 'Given the internal relationship between the dispensation of redeeming grace and the order of creation, the Church as the immaculate bride of Christ becomes a sacrament and efficacious sign of the world in its proper responsiveness to the Lord of creation.¹⁸ In the celebration of the eucharist Christ becomes one flesh with his Church. 'The dialogue between priest and the worshipping community is a realization, symbolically and sacramentally, of the encounter between the bridegroom and the bride.'¹⁹ A priest, acting *in persona Christi*, must, it is argued, be an icon of Christ's maleness.

At its best this is a creative and persuasive theology, which has some apparent affinities with the French philosophical feminist assertion of *différence* and gender-symbolism. But the French feminists write with an awareness of how *différence* has been critically deconstructed; advocates of this kind of

theology, by contrast, do not. The gulf between the complementarity theories of an 'eternal feminine' theology on the one hand, and radical and liberal feminism on the other, may seem unbridgeable. The discussion has not ended, but only just begun. Symbolic representations do matter, and life cannot be interpreted in purely socio-political terms. But symbolic power may change, or may even die. At any rate, arguments about gender-symbolism and gender constructs are probably one of the important areas of growth in contemporary theological thought.²⁰

Conventional wisdom – including religious wisdom – has been challenged by the current debates surrounding gender identity and human personhood, and by the recognition of 'all situations as bearers and generators of gendered relationships, meaning and symbolism'.²¹ Radical feminists argue that Christian thought and practice are essentially and irredeemably sexist and androcentric. This challenge can be met by a recognition of the distorting lenses of gender through which traditionally we have viewed Christian life and practice. We do not have to continue to use the lenses of polarization, androcentrism or biological essentialism as part of the Christian way of seeing things. We can search for and test alternatives which might correct and enhance our vision, rather than remain visually impaired.

NOTES

¹ Title taken from Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The lenses of gender: transforming the debate on sexual inequality* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

² See Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (eds), *The special nature of women?*, *Concilium* 1991/6.

³ Gerda Lerner, *The creation of patriarchy* (Oxford University Press, 1986), and *The creation of feminist consciousness from the Middle Ages to 1870* (Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴ Anne Carr, citing Carl Degler in 'The scholarship of gender: women's studies and religious studies' in *Transforming grace: Christian tradition and women's experience* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), p 68. See also pp 63–94.

⁵ Agnes Fine, 'A consideration of the trousseau: a feminine culture' in Michelle Perrot (ed), *Writing women's history* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp 118–145.

⁶ Alain Corgin, 'A sex in mourning: the history of women in the nineteenth century' in *Writing women's history*, pp 106–117.

⁷ Rosi Braidotti, 'Sexual difference as a nomadic political project' in *Voicing identity: women and religious traditions in Europe* (Fifth Biennial Conference of the European Society of Women in Theological Research, Louvain, 1993), p 4. See also her *Nomadic subjects* (Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁸ Ursula King (ed), *Religion and gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p 6.

⁹ Elaine Graham, *Making the difference: gender, personhood and theology* (London: Mowbray, 1995), p 215.

¹⁰ R. Braidotti, 'Sexual difference', p 4.

¹¹ William McDonough, 'Acknowledging the gift of gay priestly celibacy', *Review for Religious* 55 (May/June, 1996), pp 286–287.

¹² Graham, *Making the difference*, p 42.

¹³ Graham, *Making the difference*, p 62.

¹⁴ See above, note 1.

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, 'Égales à qui?' ('Equal to whom?' trans Robert L. Mazzola, *differences* 1[2] 1988, pp 59–76.)

¹⁶ Angela Tilby, 'From the real to the unreal: religious belief in a sceptical world', *The Way* 35 (April, 1995), p 155.

¹⁷ For example Sarah Butler or Prudence Allen. See Fergus Kerr, 'Discipleship of equals or nuptial mystery?', *New Blackfriars* 75 (July/August, 1994), pp 344–354.

¹⁸ Kerr, 'Discipleship', p 350.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See also: Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, gender and Christian mysticism* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); Daphne Hampson (ed), *Swallowing a fishbone?: feminist theologians debate Christianity* (SPCK, 1996); Mary Aquin O'Neill, 'The mystery of being human together: anthropology' in Catherine Mowry LaCugna (ed), *Freeing theology: the essentials of theology in feminist perspective* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), pp 139–160; Joan Scott, 'Deconstructing equality versus difference', *Feminist Studies* 14/1 (1988).

²¹ Graham, *Making the difference*, p 217.