

## Patristic Views on the Ontology of Gender

*Valerie A. Karras*

Perhaps nothing is as integral to our human idea of personhood as gender. The first question we ask when told that a woman has had a baby is, “Is it a boy or a girl?” Rarely do we care which sex the child is; knowing its gender, however, helps us to establish its nascent personhood in our minds more concretely. The television program “Saturday Night Live” has had a popular recurring skit featuring the androgynous person Pat, who discomforts everyone because no one is able to discern Pat’s gender. The concept of gender is ingrained almost as deeply into the human psyche as it is into our mortal, passible bodies. Many modern Orthodox theologians believe that this gender distinction in humanity is intrinsic to our very being. But what exactly does the theological tradition of the Greek Fathers teach us about the nature of human gender?

### THE IMAGE

For the Fathers, the root of the ontology of all humanity, both male and female, is God’s image. Panayiotis Nellas understood the patristic mind quite well when he remarked that “[the] category of biological existence does not exhaust man. Man is understood ontologically by the Fathers only as a theological being. His ontology is iconic.”<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:26 says that God decided to make humanity, ἄνθρωπος, in His image, κατ’ εἰκόνα Θεοῦ. Therefore, the first and most obvious question is what, exactly, constitutes God’s image in man, and is gender somehow reflective of that image?

Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man [ἄνθρωπος] in His own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” The Fathers interpret the final phrase of this verse in an inclusive sense, to show that man and woman are equally created in God’s image. Several modern theologians, however,

have taken it in a normative, ontological sense. In other words, they believe that gender itself must somehow be a reflection of God's image at the human level. Thus, although Thomas Hopko recognizes that God is beyond sexuality, he nevertheless speculates that

[g]ender differentiation for human beings is an essential element in their ability to reflect and participate in God's divine being and life whose content is love. . . . And it is exactly as men and women, and in their intercommunion together, that human beings find and fulfill themselves as creatures made in God's image and likeness since their sexuality is an essential part of their humanity. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Hopko and others see some type of correspondence between men and Christ, on the one hand, and women and the Holy Spirit, on the other. Some place it at the ontological level, that is, the male gender is an image of Christ and the female an image of the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> This dangerously heretical notion has serious repercussions in the areas of soteriology and Trinitarian theology that have led some to retreat from their earlier positions. Others<sup>4</sup> try to ameliorate these theological implications by placing the correspondence at the level of God's economic activity, that is, how the Holy Trinity operates in creation.

But this thesis is not borne out by the patristic tradition of the Orthodox Church. In fact, there is absolutely *no* evidence that any of the Fathers believe human gender to image in any normative way the relations among the persons of the Holy Trinity or their economic functions. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and Verna Harrison, in the fall 1993 issue of *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*,<sup>5</sup> using Syriac and Greek patristic texts, respectively, show that no person of the Trinity exhibits predominantly feminine or masculine characteristics, either ontologically or economically. Harrison, in fact, points out that, for the Fathers, the closest human model to God the Father is not a man but, rather, the Theotokos.

Let me discuss humanity's reflection of the Trinity's ontological nature a bit further. St. Gregory of Nyssa, in a work on the image and likeness of God,<sup>6</sup> describes the first human beings as the image of the Trinity in an ontological but genderless way. Gregory sees Adam, Eve, and their son as the image of the three persons of the Trinity, sharing one essence (ὁμοούσιοι). Adam is the type and image of the uncaused Father, the son begotten of Adam is the obvious image of Christ, and ἐκπορευτή Eve is the image of the Holy Spirit, because her procession from Adam is a *typos* for the Holy Spirit's procession from the Father. Interestingly, though, he believes Adam's and Eve's roles as types for the Father and the Holy Spirit are unrepeatable. *All* human beings are henceforth types of the begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

And so, from a unique perspective, St. Gregory of Nyssa in fact echoes the theology of the general patristic tradition: humanity, both male and female, is created in the image of Christ. The language used by some Fathers implies that the image of Christ comprises the human being's entire nature, physical as well as spiritual. Irenaeus affirms a derivative relationship between body and soul, claiming that "even that which is visible carries the divine form."<sup>7</sup> For Gregory of

Nyssa, the body, although not truly reflective of the image of God, becomes an instrument whose parts and attributes, such as hands and upright posture, enhance aspects of the image.<sup>8</sup> He does not believe, however, that gender is one of those components. It is important to note here a leap of logic of which several modern Orthodox theologians are guilty. They assume that Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa must be overly influenced by androgynous and dualistic Platonic thought because these Fathers believe that humanity's gender differentiation is purely physical. From that they deduce that such theologians separate body from soul. Kenneth Wesche, for instance, says of Gregory:

[H]is understanding of male-female ontology is caught on an inconsistency. He maintains the patristic doctrine that man in his nature is body and soul, but when he turns to the mystery of gender, he forgets and, falling back into the androgyny of Greek philosophy, attributes gender to the Fall.<sup>9</sup>

The logical (or, rather, illogical) leap they make is to assume that the body in its postlapsarian state, that is, in the fallen state of creation in which we now live, reflects God's image. Of course, for the Greek Fathers this would be the equivalent of saying that other instinctual aspects of our fallen existence, such as hunger, pain, and death, are also reflective of the image of God. Far from having a Platonic view of the body, Nyssa believes that humanity can exist only as body and soul, but was meant to exist with a *different kind of body* than that which we have now, a body that would not be bound by any biological necessity or instinct.

Regardless, most of the Fathers deny that the physical body reflects the image of God. John Chrysostom points out in no uncertain terms that one cannot assume God to have form simply because man is made in His image.<sup>10</sup> Basil, too, is adamant in distinguishing between the outer person and the inner one. The *real* man is the inner one; the outer is not the true man, but simply *belongs to* the inner man.<sup>11</sup> Thus, although Basil believes woman is softer than man in order to make her suited to her nurturing role,<sup>12</sup> he also describes how women show themselves as strong as or stronger than men<sup>13</sup> through deprivations, vigils, kneeling, tears, and good works, and advises us to ignore the external person and to look at the soul instead. The good woman, says Basil, has God's image just as much as the good man, for although the soul may reside in a "soft" body, it is nevertheless a soul and therefore equal; only the covering is different.<sup>14</sup>

Basil's view, in fact, is symptomatic of the Fathers' ability to distinguish among the physical, emotional, and psychological effects of our fallen bodies, especially our gender, and the ultimate genderless nature of the human soul. Thus, he admonishes women not to excuse themselves on account of weakness, for the weakness is of the flesh, not of the soul.<sup>15</sup> Gregory the Theologian, discussing his sister Gorgonia's spiritual feats, exclaims: "O nature of woman overcoming that of man in the common struggle for salvation, and demonstrating that the distinction between male and female is one of body not of soul!"<sup>16</sup> Even John Chrysostom, who constantly harangues gossipy women and violent and abusive men, using every stereotype in the book, distinguishes between our current postlapsarian state and our ontological equality. He, like the other Greek Fathers, frequently uses the verb

ἀνδρῶδες, to be virile or manly, for women saints, family members, and friends. Patristic use of this word is meant specifically to transcend traditional gender distinctions.<sup>17</sup>

### THE PURPOSE AND TEMPORARY NATURE OF GENDER

As I briefly alluded to above, the Greek Fathers make a distinction between our prelapsarian and postlapsarian bodies. John Chrysostom believes that sex appeared after the Fall; before it, Adam and Eve lived like earthly angels with no needs or passions.<sup>18</sup> He asks why there was no sex or childbirth labor in Paradise, and answers himself by asserting that these became necessary after the Fall because of our weakness.<sup>19</sup> Gregory of Nyssa specifically links this mortal, passible body to the garments of skin, the *δερμάτινες χιτῶνες* with which God clad Adam and Eve upon their expulsion from Paradise. He defines these skins as “those things which [man] took in addition from irrational skin: sexual union, conception, birth . . .”<sup>20</sup>

Beyond physical sex, gender itself is seen by all of the Fathers as an element added to humanity only because of God’s foreknowledge of man’s fall.<sup>21</sup> Several modern theologians mistakenly believe this view to be limited to two of the most speculative Greek Fathers—Gregory of Nyssa and Maximos the Confessor. Yet, John of Damascus sums up the whole patristic tradition by stating that God, in His foreknowledge, created humanity with gender for procreative purposes.<sup>22</sup> Clement of Alexandria,<sup>23</sup> Maximos the Confessor,<sup>24</sup> and Gregory of Nyssa echo the same refrain. Gregory opines that because God foresaw man’s fall from his angelic mode of life, which included an angelic—nonsexual—form of procreation, He contrived the separation of humanity into male and female for its own perpetuation.<sup>25</sup> Even John Chrysostom, who at times displays a wonderful sensitivity and understanding of how human sexuality enhances and deepens the marital bond, evinces the same sentiment. God had intended an asexual, angelic mode of procreation for humanity. Referring to this angelic mode of generation, he asserts: “Ten thousand times ten thousand angels serve God . . . and none of them came into being by *arising from one that came before* [emphasis added].”<sup>26</sup>

But even if gender was created simply because of God’s foreknowledge of humanity’s fall, has it become an eternal, ontological component of human nature? In other words, will sexual differentiation exist in the resurrection? The answer to that has to be no. Gregory of Nyssa identifies our future angelic existence in terms of the annulment of sexual differentiation.<sup>27</sup> Maximos the Confessor asserts that “Man was not intended to be divided into the categories of male and female, as is now the case; and . . . by acquiring perfect knowledge of the inner principles according to which he exists he may transcend this division.”<sup>28</sup> Using Galatians 3:28 as a proof text, he declares that sexual differentiation is purely for procreative purposes and thus need not exist permanently, “for in Christ Jesus there is no male or female.”

But not only Maximus and Gregory of Nyssa share this view. Basil the Great, for instance, in his *Homily on Psalm 114*, says: “For there is no male or female in the resurrection, but there is one certain life and it is of one kind, since those dwelling

in the land of the living are well pleasing to their Master.”<sup>29</sup> Gregory the Theologian, like Maximos, uses Galatians 3:28 to describe our state of being in the resurrection:

This is the great mystery planned for us by God . . . to resurrect the flesh and recover his image and refashion the human, that we might all become one in Christ, who became perfectly in all of us all that he himself is, *that we might no longer be male and female* [emphasis added], barbarian, Scythian, slave or free (which are identifying marks of the flesh), but might bear in ourselves only the form of God, and be shaped and imprinted by him to such an extent that we are recognized by this alone.”<sup>30</sup>

Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom use Matthew 22:30 (that we shall not marry in the resurrection because we shall be like the angels) to support the same theology. Clement says that since man and woman are distinguished only in that they marry (a condition of fallen Man), in the resurrection people will exist not as men and women, but as human beings.<sup>31</sup> This contrasts sharply with Hopko’s interpretation of the same passage: “it does not say that there will be no sexual differences ‘in the resurrection.’ It rather says that ‘they neither marry nor are given in marriage’ and are ‘like angels,’ not that they become angels.”<sup>32</sup> But Chrysostom leaves no doubt as to how we are to interpret Christ’s remarks in Matthew. Man will not be like the angels in that he does not marry; rather, he will not marry *because* he will be like the angels.<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere, Chrysostom is even more explicit. In his sixth homily on Colossians, he, too, uses Galatians 3:28 as evidence that in heaven, there will be no woman for the devil to approach, “for there is no female nor male.”<sup>34</sup>

### CONCLUSION

In summary, God’s creation of man follows a pattern of stages, according to the Fathers: (1) God decides to create humanity in His image, and after His likeness; (2) God creates humanity in His image, but adds gender, which is not a part of God’s image, due to His foreknowledge of Man’s Fall; (3) humanity falls from grace, with the concomitant results of active human sexuality and the domination of man over woman; (4) Christ redeems Man; and (5) in the resurrection God’s design for humanity is completed and fulfilled: Man exists as God originally intended, without the distinction of sexual differentiation.

But if the image of God in humanity does not extend to human sexuality, and if humanity was neither intended to include gender nor will be sexually differentiated in the resurrection, then there is no spiritual dimension, no ontological significance, to gender. Paul Evdokimov believes the phrase “male and female He made them” implies that “these two aspects of man are inseparable, to such a degree that a male or female human being taken separately and viewed *in se* is not a perfect human being.”<sup>35</sup> Yet this philosophy implies that an individual human being is not wholly and fully human, does not in and of himself or herself reflect the fullness of God’s image. This type of anthropology is the result of two errors. First, it is, at its heart, an anthropological theology, extrapolating from humanity back to the Godhead, rather than the theological anthropology of the Fathers, which is firmly rooted in God’s image in humanity. Second, it confuses the prelapsarian and

resurrection states with postlapsarian humanity.

There are two dangers to a dogmatic insistence on an ontological significance to sexual differentiation. The first concerns the nature of being. Theologians like Evdokimov, Hopko, and Wesche have unwittingly introduced an intermediate level of ontological existence between that of essence or nature (οὐσία or φύσις), on the one hand, which all of the Fathers concur is human regardless of whether it is male or female, and its concrete manifestation in a person or hypostasis (πρόσωπον or ὑπόστασις). The second, corollary danger of this unorthodox introduction of an intermediate category of existence is its denial of complete freedom to the person in his or her relationship with God and with other human persons. This complete freedom of personal expression within the context of one humanity is the true nature of humanity's reflection of the interpersonal relationships within the Trinity. Rather than human beings relating to each other as complete persons expressing their full humanity truly and uniquely, these theologians believe that humans are bound (or should be) by their masculine or feminine nature. Our expression of our deepest selves thus becomes either instinctual or, à la B. F. Skinner, it is molded by our environment, in this case by the body's gender. Does every man, then, by nature express his love for God differently than every woman does but in some way similarly to every other man?

Even worse are the roles thus defined for men's and women's relations with each other, innocuously couched in loving and intimate adjectives such as "self-giving" for men and "receptive" for women. By adding gender to Man's ontological nature, these neo-theologians reduce the complete freedom expressed by the Trinity to a partial one: each human being expresses himself or herself *within the bounds of his or her sexual nature*, a notion heretical to the Fathers.

To conclude, of course humanity is affected by its biological nature and instincts, even more, perhaps, than by its environment. But we cannot be restricted by our biological hypostasis, for we are called to transcend biological necessity. I believe it appropriate to repeat here a statement by Panayiotis Nellas that I cited near the beginning of this presentation: "The category of biological existence does not exhaust man. Man is understood ontologically by the Fathers only as a theological being." By growing into God's likeness, the human being fulfills God's plan. Humanity becomes a community of ecstatic persons in communion with God and with each other. Each human being must express himself or herself uniquely in an ecstatic outpouring of love that is determined not by any biological necessity but by his or her unique, ontological relationship to God and to other human beings.

## NOTES

1. Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ*, trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 33–34.

2. Thomas Hopko, "God and Gender: Articulating the Orthodox View," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37, no. 2–3 (1993): 160.

3. See, e.g., Thomas Hopko, "On the Male Character of the Christian Priesthood," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (1975): 147–173.

4. Vlassios Pheidias, "The Question of the Priesthood of Women," in Gennadios Limouris, ed., *The Place of the Woman in the Orthodox Church and the Question of the Ordination of Women* (Katerini, Greece: Tertios Publications, 1992), 157–196, esp. 174ff.

5. Susan Ashbrook Harvey, "Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and the Early Syriac Tradition," and Verna Harrison, "The Fatherhood of God in Orthodox Theology," in *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37:2 and 3 (1993): 111–139 and 185–212, respectively.

6. Gregory of Nyssa, *De eo, quid sit, ad imaginem Dei*, PG 44:1327–1346.

7. Irenaeus, *Demonstration de la Predication Apostolique*, SC 62, 48–49.

8. Gregory of Nyssa, *De hominis opificio*, PG 44:136B.

9. Kenneth Paul Wesche, "Man and Woman in Orthodox Tradition: The Mystery of Gender," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 37, no. 2–3 (1993): 242, n. 75.

10. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, Hom. 8, 4 (8).

11. Basil, *On the Origin of Man*, I, 7, SC 160, 182.

12. PG 31:1453C.

13. Ἀσκητικὴ προδιατύπωσις 3, PG 31:624D–625A.

14. Basil, *Origin of Man*, I, 18, p. 214.

15. *Ibid.*, 212.

16. *Or.* 8, 14, PG 35:805B. Quoted in Verna Harrison, "Male and Female in Cappadocian Theology," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 41, pt. 2 (October 1990): 459.

17. See Harrison, "Male and Female," pp. 446–447, and Elizabeth Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom, and Friends* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979), 15.

18. *Genesis*, Hom. 15, 4.

19. *De Virginitate*, 15. Also see Nyssa, *De Virginitate*, XII, 4.

20. *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, PG 46:148C–149A.

21. See, e.g., Didymus, *Genesis*, 62, SC 233, 158.

22. *On the Orthodox Faith*, 4, 24, PG 94:1208D.

23. *Paedagogos*, I, IV, 10, 3.

24. *De Ambigua*, PG 91:1309A.

25. *De Hominis Opificio*, PG 44:189CD.

26. *De Virginitate*, 14–17, PG 48:544–546. Quoted in Nellas, *Deification*, 76.

27. *De Hom. Opif.*, PG 44:188C–189A.

28. *De Ambigua*, PG 91:1305CD.

29. PG 29:492C. Trans. and quoted in Harrison, "Male and Female," 451.

30. *Or.* 7, 23, PG 35:785C. Trans. and quoted in Harrison, "Male and Female," 459.

31. *Paedagogos*, I, IV, 10, 3.

32. Hopko, "Male Character," 151.

33. *Homilies on Matthew*, Hom. 70, 3.

34. *Hom. 6 Col.*, 4, PG 62:342. See Clark, *Jerome, Chrysostom and Friends*, 34, n. 161.

35. *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 139.