

Being Human

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Being human: how could that be an issue? Perhaps it wasn't in the past, when what it is to be human was agreed by all and taken for granted. But if we look back to the past, we must try to ensure we look back to the real past, and not simply project back an idealized form of the present. Whatever "being human" is, whatever modes of being human there are, it is something fashioned by relationships: with our mother, the other members of the family, our peers, our friends, the opposite sex. Being human is less something given than something that develops, something we discover. Perhaps, as Father John Behr has suggested in various recent works, we should think rather of *becoming* human, rather than *being* human: being human is a goal, a *telos*, the fulfilment of our image-likeness to God.¹

Whatever philosophers and others thought the case in the past, what we mean by being human nowadays cannot be reduced to our mental capacities. It involves the body, and the body is the location of sexual difference. The work of phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has suggested—demonstrated, even—that perception is not a matter of the mind looking from the citadel of the body, but of the engagement of the body itself with the world to which it belongs, and indeed the engagement of

a sexually determined body. Changes in our perception of sexuality and gender have suggested that ways or modes of being human are perhaps more diverse than was once thought, though, as I shall suggest, paradoxically the awareness of diversity has gone along with a narrowing of what is to count as a human relationship.

These changes in perceiving what it is to be human inevitably affect what it is to be human in today's church, but this touches on sensitive issues, and has provoked discussion that is often polarized—indeed so polarized that one is using language loosely to call it discussion. In many ways, the discussion of sexuality in the church (and, even more, the lack or even refusal of discussion) is curiously familiar. The situation is much the same with the question of women's ministry in the church, and if one casts one's mind back, one can discern other issues in the past (or even in the present) that manifest the same kind of discussion/non-discussion, whether over the acceptance of manifestations of Christianity outside the bounds of Orthodoxy, critical scholarship on the Scriptures and the history of the church, the theory of evolution, and more widely the relationship between science and religion, bound up with changes in the understanding of the place of humankind in the universe, or

¹ John Behr, *Becoming Human: Meditations on Christian Anthropology in Word and Image* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2013).



changes dependent on the rapid shifts in the patterns of human living. In all these cases, we find what are essentially Orthodox *reactions*, and, what is more, all too often reactions inspired by fear. What discussion there is tends to be tentative and stiff; the tendency to behave like what Father Ephrem Lash (of blessed memory) once called “the double-headed Byzantine ostrich” is all too common. Confidence in the tradition we have received seems in short supply: instead of Orthodoxy meaning a confidence in being in touch with the roots of our faith, it too easily means a reluctance to dare to stray too far from where we feel comfortable. Orthodoxy manifests itself in being conservative, rather than truly radical.

In many of these cases, we find a similar pattern: the conservative reaction appeals to tradition, but too often this tradition turns out to be a reaction dictated by fear of change. If, however, tradition means what is handed down, and the process of handing down—as we are so often told—then the very notion of tradition is bound up with encountering change. There would be no need for the process of handing down the deposit of faith if everything remained the same, but things don’t remain the same and indeed it often seems as if we live in a period of more dramatic change than has ever been known (though I expect that many in past ages had much the same perception)—which only means that we need to rethink what is the heart of what we believe in changed circumstances. John Henry Newman’s words are wise and worth recalling: “to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.” An example of what I mean can be found in the all-

too-common conservative Christian attitude to the theory of evolution. Evolution seems to undermine the Christian faith by making obscure the connection between the Creator and his creation. So Christians who think like this fall back on what the Scriptures say, believing that to rely on the word of Scripture in this way is to assert the tradition, as found, say, in the fathers of the Church. It doesn’t take much reflection—and indeed only a little research—to discover that the kind of conservative readings of the Genesis story that are often put up in opposition to what it is thought Darwin said (often without bothering to read what Darwin himself had to say) bear almost no relation to what we find in the reflection of the fathers on the account found in Genesis.² Such Christians have imagined a tradition that has no right to call itself tradition.

Unwillingness to think through what we believe has been handed down by tradition all too often leads to an unthinking conservatism, rather than a true faithfulness to tradition. There is something else involved, as well. I have spoken of Orthodox *reaction*, for that is what too much Orthodox opinion is—reactive—not the development of a truly Orthodox perception, but a reactive response to something that is felt to be challenging. And that challenge is perceived to be coming from the outside, from the culture and society that surround us, almost as if we were not ourselves part of them. Instead of engaging with the underlying perceptions of the culture and society to which we belong and which has nurtured us, we see them as a threat that undermines our own culture as Orthodox Christians. This attitude seems to me all too preva-

² See Andrew Louth, “The Six Days of Creation according to the Greek Fathers,” in *Reading Genesis after Darwin*, ed. Stephen C. Barton and David Wilkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 39–55; and Peter C. Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2008).

Opposite page:
Christ Pantocrator,
Saint Catherine’s
Monastery, Sinai,
sixth century.

lent in the documents produced by the 2016 Great and Holy Council of Crete: a grudging admission of what has been achieved in our modern culture—without which (I am thinking of modern means of travel and communication, no more) there could have been no synod at all—combined with an overwhelming fear of the dangers of modernity.

And so in the case of sexuality and the Church. Changes in the perception of sexuality in the modern world are posing problems that we Orthodox would rather not face; we prefer to behave like Father Ephrem's double-headed Byzantine ostrich. Nevertheless, we are being forced to confront them. They are not problems that will go away, for their causes lie in genuine changes in modern society. These causes include the consequences for human sexual relationships of the breaking of the link between sexual congress and child-bearing (which has an impact on issues like premarital relationships, where it is my perception that in many parts of the Orthodox world pastoral practice is responding to this change—quietly, without fuss) and the consequent change in the position of women in society (ushered in, at least so far as Western Europe has been concerned, by the disruptive effects of the World Wars of the last century). Bound up with all this is a sense of the difference between sex and gender, the former being biological, the latter cultural (though the perception of gender roles as culturally determined, at least to some extent, is evident to anyone with a broad knowledge of human history): notions of brutal masculinity and submissive femininity have caused, and still cause, untold harm.

What are we to do, as Orthodox Christians, in the face of these changes in the perception of sexuality? Simply embrace them, and follow the society in which we live by adopting its changed standards, which would mean accepting the legitimacy of same-sex relationships (including sexual relations), same-sex marriage, serial heterosexual marriage (which has to some extent happened among middle-class Orthodox) . . . ? Or should we affirm our “traditional” values and refuse to accept any of this? Part of the problem is that this matter is not theoretical. It is not the case that the experience of same-sex attraction and the desire to live together occurs only among Orthodox who are weak in faith. I doubt if there are any confessors who have not faced the anxiety, even agony, of deeply devout Orthodox Christians torn between their perception of the teaching of our Church and the power of homosexual attraction. It is a real problem and the purpose of this issue of *The Wheel* is to initiate (or continue) discussion. It is a problem bound up with the Church being in the world. We say that the Church is *in* the world, but is not to be *of* the world: it needs discernment to know what this means in this case.

There is a further issue, in some ways not unlike the issue of the ordination of women to the priesthood (itself a product of changing notions of sexuality). In both cases it seems to be clear what the “traditional” position is—sexual activity restricted to heterosexual marriage, an all-male priesthood—but once one tries to justify this traditional position, it becomes unclear how to do so. In the case of the ordination of women to the priesthood, the grounds most readily offered—Christ was a man, the apos-

tles were all men—are easily called in question: Christ became *anthrōpos*, not *anēr*, according to the consistent language of the fathers—*human*, not *male*; that the apostles were all men is most likely bound to the culture of first-century Palestine, and it is, anyway, striking that women formed such a part of Christ’s entourage, and were pre-eminently witnesses of the resurrection. More sophisticated grounds for restricting the priesthood to men—regarding them as images of (a male) Christ—have not always convinced those who have advanced them. So too with sexuality: it is convincingly argued that the apparent condemnation of same-sex relationships in the Scriptures reflects a pre-modern mentality that cannot be universalized. Furthermore, the most popular ways of developing a more acceptable understanding of human sexuality from the Scriptures suffer from multiple problems. The notion that the traditional Christian understanding of sexuality revolves round the ideal of man and woman united in marriage will not survive any appeal to the fathers. For the fathers, marriage was no ideal, but a concession to human sexual weakness; the human ideal was celibacy. The notion of marriage as a form of asceticism, quite as demanding as the asceticism of monasticism, is quite recent, and can hardly be called traditional, for all the truth that it contains. The appeal to the chants sung at the crowning of the wedded couple does not correspond to anything explicit in the wedding rite, which is, anyway, quite late. Recourse (by modern writers, that is) is often made to the verse of Genesis: “So God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). Human sexual differentiation is bound up with being made in the image of God, and the re-

lationship between man and woman in marriage is an image of the Holy Trinity. From that premise, a very sunny picture of human sexual relationships as reflecting the divine life can easily be developed. It is, however, a fragile argument, as Jean-Claude Larchet demonstrates in his review of the French bishop, Marc-Antoine de Beauregard’s *Regard chrétien sur l’homosexualité* (2013). Bishop de Beauregard develops the interpretation of Genesis 1:27 sketched above, and on its basis develops an understanding of human sexuality that finds its clearest expression in marriage; Larchet has no difficulty in demolishing his argument—arguing that there is no reason to suppose the clauses of the verse are to be regarded as being in apposition, rather than in sequence—though for the rest he endorses the bishop’s pastoral approach to homosexuals in the Church.³

There is then very little that is given in the tradition of the Church about human sexuality. What I find worrying about Orthodox reflection on sexuality, whether “liberal” or “conservative” (in my view, very unhelpful epithets) is the apparent need to reach a clearly defined conclusion. It seems to me that any adequate view of sexuality has to be bound up with an awareness of the mystery of the human being, created in the image of God. There is, however, something else I want to advance.

“Reactive” responses to the issues raised by modern perceptions of sexuality seem to me to be, almost by definition, shallow. Are we to accept the demands of modern perceptions of sexuality, or to reject them? Perhaps, first, we need to try and understand them. *Tout comprendre rend très in-*

³ See <https://orthodoxologie.blogspot.co.uk/2014/08/jean-claude-larchet-recensionpere-marc.html>.

dulgent: so Madame de Staël. Maybe not, however. Instead of accepting or rejecting, we first need to see what is involved. For whatever reason (and I have suggested some already), it seems to me that modern society has become over-sexualized. By that I mean that all human relationships are regarded as fundamentally sexual. This was not always so, and the change has been relatively recent.

Whatever the reasons, this tendency to reduce all human relationships to sexual relationships seems to me to entail a diminishment of human experience. The causes doubtless run deep: perhaps some kind of oversimplified Freudianism, maybe an entailment of consumerism, which tends to reduce

all human activities to the pursuit of readily achievable pleasure. Whatever the reasons, it seems to me that it is something that has taken place during my lifetime. I have known, and still know, same-sex couples who share their lives by living together, essentially it seems to me for companionship. Nowadays there is gossip about them as “homosexuals”; they experience pressure to “come out.” But it was not always so; certainly not when I was a child in the 1950s. I remember in particular one couple of women, whom we knew through church, and whom we called “aunt.” They were not relations, but our family welcomed them, and they treated my brothers and me as if we were their nephews. No one thought of them as “lesbians”;



Virgin-Martyr Praxedes with Saint Paul. Mosaic, Basilica of Saint Praxedes, Rome, 817-24 AD.

no one questioned their right to live together. Back in the 1950s there must have been many women who lived together for companionship, given the carnage among men of two World Wars. I have known, sometimes very well, pairs of men who have lived together, and until a decade or so ago, I was unaware of any comment: such couples found support from each other by sharing their lives and their home; the alternative would have been loneliness and isolation. What they did together, how they behaved towards one another, was of no concern to any except themselves. Some of these relationships may well have been romantic—they may have been in love with each other—but that was their concern, not that of others. My anxiety here is that this is no longer: various pressures, from that exercised by “peer homosexuals” to changes in legislation in many parts of the Western world (first, civil partnerships, and now same-sex marriage) invite or demand clarification of the nature of these same-sex relationships.

Along with this tendency to sexualize relationships, there seems to be (at least in my experience in England; it appears different among those of other nationalities) a coolness, and lack of physicality, in human relationships. Any physicality—touching, closeness, certainly kissing—is regarded as sexual. One thing many converts, such as I am, have experienced on becoming Orthodox is a greater warmth and physicality in human relationships. We embrace, we kiss on the cheek; the frigid distance of the English handshake, which is as much a mark of holding off as of welcome, is foreign in such contexts. I am conscious that such behavior is looked at askance by non-Orthodox. I am mentioning this

simply to make the point that the sexualization of human relationships is not—yet—universal, and I find it interesting that it is among Orthodox (in my experience; though I detect a similar impatience with coolness between friends and relations when one moves beyond the English) that awareness of, and embrace of, such closeness is to be found. The sexualization of human society has other manifestations: the encouragement of young girls—and boys—to a precipitate, or premature, adoption of sexual behavior. I do not mean play: play has clearly acknowledged boundaries—boys and girls play at being adults, at being mummy and daddy, as a way of exploring their developing identity. That is good and necessary. The problem in our oversexualized society is that such play is encouraged to an inappropriate seriousness—encouraged not least by advertising with its tendency to make capital out of the natural attractiveness of the young in a way that can rob children of their childhood, by taking away the boundaries implicit in the practice of play. It sometimes seems as if the sexualization of modern society is even invading relationships within the family. Warm, even intense, family relationships are familiar from what we know of such relationships in earlier centuries: particularly revealing are the letters that were written and often survive in astonishing abundance, which often contain warm expressions of human closeness. Doubtless some of these relationships were unhealthy, but nowadays we are too swift to judge, murmuring incest, but at the same time ruling out what had been, and still could be, an innocent, and immensely supportive, realm of close relationships within the family: relationships that perhaps challenge the narrowing of our vision to the nu-

clear family of modern Western society.

I want to suggest that the sexualization of our society is limiting the range of human experience and leading us to overlook other aspects of human relationships that are not overtly sexual—indeed, I would say, not necessarily sexual at all. Before we get to the questions that do indeed exist, before we begin to consider relationships that “traditionally” are considered off limits, we need to be sure that we are not falling in with the deplorable tendency of Western consumerist society to cast all human relationships in sexual terms. Another consequence of this tendency to sexualize is an excessive concentration on “successful” sexual activity, which can amount almost to an obsession. It leads, I would suggest, to a prurience about the sexual behavior of others that is really none of our business. Though there is clearly a difference between being in love and being fond of someone, there seems to me a spectrum here, not a sharp opposition. Fondness can lead to being in love, and being in love does not necessarily lead to the establishment of a shared life; falling out of love can lead back to fondness, and need not lead to resentment and alienation. Both fondness and being in love find expression in closeness, giving mutual pleasure, tender caressing. It is little concern of others what form this takes, though clearly something is

wrong if respect and tenderness gives way to exploitation and harm.

All these considerations are meant to suggest that human beings relate to one another in a variety of ways and for many reasons: we diminish if we reduce human relationships to sexual behavior. One crucial form of human relationship is friendship. Like all relationships, it needs to be worked at, it doesn't just happen: Samuel Johnson, who had many friends, both women and men, spoke of “keeping friendship in good repair”— he knew whereof he spoke.

Only, I suggest, when we regain a sense of the variety of human relationships will we be in a position to make credible decisions about what relationships are acceptable and what not. My sense is that human ways of being together are very varied, and that we are being seduced by the sexualization of modern Western society into thinking that the modes of human being-together are to be defined in sexual terms. This seems to me to be just as true of those who want to argue that the ideal form of human living is monogamous union. We need a greater sense of the manifold ways of human relationships and human closeness, together with a profound sense of the mystery of the human, created as we believe in the image of our God, whose love surpasses our understanding and who remains, properly, unknown. ✱



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