

---

# REDEEMING GENDER (2017)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For 25 years I have been writing about theology and sexuality. Two principal issues have been the possibility of the accommodation of women's bodies in masculine sacral and sacramental space (the ordination of women), and the possibility of the accommodation of same-sex desire within the modern two-sex binary (homosexuality). They have a common yet largely unnoticed root: gender. More recently the visibility and audibility of intersex and trans people tests this struggling binary still further. In this paper I will i) uncover the historical roots of the debilitating divisions within the churches about these issues; ii) issue challenges to conservative theologies and secular orthodoxies alike; and iii) show how a re-reading of basic Christian doctrines can produce the inclusive church that many Christians long for.

## 1.CONFLICT IN THE CHURCHES: SOME HISTORICAL ROOTS

### 1.1 ONE SEX

In *Redeeming Gender*,<sup>1</sup> I try to show the importance of Thomas Laqueur's 1990 book, *Making Sex*, for Christian theology. Laqueur argues that for most of our history in the West, there has been one sex, not two. 'For thousands of years it had been a common place that women had the same genitals as men except that, as Nemesius, bishop of Emesa in the fourth century, put it: "theirs are inside the body and not outside it"'.<sup>2</sup> Galen (c.130 – c.210CE), he continues, 'demonstrated at length that women were essentially men in whom a lack of vital heat – of perfection – had resulted in the retention, inside, of structures that in the male are visible without'. Men and women constitute a single sex with similar reproductive equipment. '...the vagina is imagined as an interior penis, the labia as foreskin, the uterus as scrotum, and the ovaries as testicles'.

In a medical school where I teach part-time (the Plymouth University Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry) I discovered a second edition of a rare tome, by a French doctor, Francois Mauriceau (1637-1709), *The Diseases of VVomen with Child, And in Child-bed*.<sup>3</sup> The first edition was published in 1668: the second edition in 1683. The work lends the full authority of the emerging science of anatomy to the standard belief that women, being men, have testicles; it describes what female testicles do; why these testicles are inferior to men's (no surprise there); and why women need to have an orgasm (or orgasms) to conceive. In 1668, then, the one-sex theory is alive and well in the medical schools of Europe. 'Every Woman', declares Mauriceau, '*hath two Tefticles as well as Men, being alfo for the fame ufe, which is to convert into fruitful Seed the Blood*

---

<sup>1</sup> Adrian Thatcher, *Redeeming Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge MA / London: Harvard University Press), p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Mauriceau, *The Diseases of VVomen with Child, And in Child-bed*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition [translated and enlarged by Hugh Chamberlen] (London: John Darby, 1683 [1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1668]).

*that is brought to them by the Preparing Veffels...; but they differ from thofe of Men in feituation, figure, magnitude, fubftance, temperature, and compofition*<sup>4</sup>.

The second edition of Mauriceau's work, 45 years later, contains a commentary by the editor, Francois Chamberlen. This commentary is especially useful for understanding how, in the short period between the first and second edition, the one-sex theory was already being challenged. Chamberlen frankly disagrees with Mauriceau. 'Our Author', he chides, in a dissenting footnote, is '*lying under a Miftake*'. Women, he proclaims (in 1683), don't have testicles at all. They have *Ovaria*. They don't make seed. There aren't any spermatogenic vessels for conveying it to the womb. Women have eggs which get impregnated by the sperms of men:

*We find that the Tefticles of a Woman are no more than, as it were, two clufter of Eggs, which lie there to be impregnated by the fpirituos Particles, or animating Effluuims,...And as he is miftaken in the Tefticles, fo is he likewife in an Error in his acceptation of the Woman's Seed: For indeed there is none fent forth by the Ejaculatory Veffels (by us called Fallopius's Tubes) in coition, there being no Seed in the Ovaria, or Tefticles...*<sup>5</sup>.

## 1.2 TWO SEXES

The arrival of incommensurable sexual difference in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is announced in these discoveries. Natural rights theories and theories influenced by Cartesian dualism, then contemporary, have no issue with sexual difference. If there are human rights, all humans have them. If humans are fundamentally souls, as Descartes thought, the sex of bodies attached to them is irrelevant to their status. What happens, as Londa Schiebinger has shown,<sup>6</sup> is a new two-sex ideology which preserves patriarchy by other means. The bodies of women are deemed *utterly* different from the bodies of men, made for pregnancy, childbirth and nurturing; their brains too small for doing science or philosophy; their bodies too delicate for sport; their passions (located in the uterus) too strong to escape the calming of male control. Their role is maternal, their place is domestic, their social position remains subordinate to men.

Laqueur's thesis has its critics. They want to say that he rides roughshod over contrary evidence, and is overly discursive.<sup>7</sup> But the changes in the medical understanding of sexed bodies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century signals a radical development from past theories, whatever they were. Michael McKeon, rather blandly, names the new ideology 'The Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Sexuality Hypothesis',<sup>8</sup> which, I think, stands whether or not Laqueur's claims about previous centuries are over-simplified. This hypothesis holds that in early modernity, the

---

<sup>4</sup> Mauriceau, *op.cit.*, p.8.

<sup>5</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.9.

<sup>6</sup> Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Thatcher, *op.cit.*, pp.50-57.

<sup>8</sup> Michael McKeon, 'The Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Sexuality Hypothesis'. *Signs*, 37.4, (2012), 791-801.

one-sex model of anatomy was incompletely challenged and replaced by the modern two-sex model, according to which the difference between men and women is not a matter of distinction along a common gradient but a radical separation based on fundamental physiological differences. Women are not an underdeveloped and inferior version of men; they are biologically and naturally different from them—the opposite sex.<sup>9</sup>

There is a consensus among historians not just that these changes occurred, but that the new sciences were enthusiastically deployed in order to maintain the gendered *status quo*. Two sex theories quickly became orthodoxies, and they came in two versions: one version assumes inequality, the other kind assumes equality. I trace inequality in the exemplars of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and George Hegel from many more that could be chosen. My exemplars of the equality version of two sexes are Francois Poullain de la Barre, John Stuart Mill and of course Mary Wollstonecraft. The former, inequality, version was generally favoured by the churches until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Just as the one-sex theory is underivable from facts about bodies, so is the two-sex theory. I devote a chapter to the *uncovering*, during the last 40 years, of the pervasiveness of sexual dimorphism in science. It began to be realized that ‘biological, psychological, and social differences do not lead to our seeing two genders. Our seeing two genders leads to the “discovery” of biological, psychological, and social differences’.<sup>10</sup> ‘Queer biology’ – a ‘school of thought [which] argues that our understanding of the biological world is framed by *what we think we already know*’<sup>11</sup> – is becoming better known. From this perspective, ‘absolute sexual dimorphism remains one of the last false metanarratives governing our thinking, and contributes to a relationship between the sexes grounded in hierarchy and privilege’. Again the attempt to derive the morality of gender from assumed facts about bodies is shown to be fraught with problems.

### 1.3 ONE SEX IN CHURCH

There is one obvious place where traces of the one-sex theory survive more or less intact, down to the present day. These are the expressive practices of Christianity in liturgy, hymnody and public proclamation. Many theological students (and their teachers) in the 1970s and 1980s utilized the new and disparaging term ‘sexism’ to identify, remove and replace terms such as ‘man’, ‘men’, ‘mankind’, ‘fellowship’, etc., when these same terms were intended to include women and children, but without saying so. We railed against the masculine nomenclature at the basis of Christian God-language, and tried not to use ‘He’, ‘Him’, ‘His’, ‘Himself’ when preaching and hymn-singing. (In my home church we still confess to ‘our heavenly Father’ that ‘we have sinned against you and against our fellow men’).<sup>12</sup> But we completely failed to understand the origin of this masculinist language. Instead of condemning prejudice (which of course it was) we had yet to learn that

---

<sup>9</sup> McKeon, *art.cit.*, p.793.

<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (New York: John Wiley, 1978).

<sup>11</sup> Dee Amy-Chinn, ‘Is Queer Biology a Useful Tool for Queer Theology?’, *Theology and Sexuality*, 15 (1), 2009 [49-63], p.50 (author's emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> *The Sunday Service* (Methodist Conference Office, 1976), B5.

masculinist language *provided massive, primary evidence of the unaltered continuation of the one-sex theory* into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and now well beyond it. Since women are men (albeit inferior and all that males are not), it is obvious that to speak of 'men' is to speak of men and women. That is what the Church has always done.

#### 1.4 COMPLEMENTARITY

Since perfection and likeness to God appear as masculine qualities at the masculine end of the one-sex continuum, it is obvious that women, thus stigmatized, will be unable to represent the perfect Christ. The Roman Catholic arguments of say, *Inter insigniores*<sup>13</sup> are all analysable in terms of the masculinism of the one-sex theory. A one-sex theological anthropology is then mixed with that modern bastardized concept – complementarity. Complementarity has a triple parentage: the ravings of Rousseau, Einstein's theory of light, and a literal reading of Genesis 1 (without Genesis 2 and 3). The rise and rise of complementarity is astonishing. First used in official Catholic writing in *Familiaris consortio* in 1981, by 2003 the Anglican House of Bishops declared, contrary to a mass of evidence, that 'a belief in complementarity has always been a part of orthodox Christian theology'<sup>14</sup>. The bishops even elevate it to the status of an Anglican 'core belief'.<sup>15</sup> Complementarity re-runs the frisson between rival 18<sup>th</sup> century theories about whether two sexes are equal or not. In some evangelical thought complementarity is affirmed just because it does *not* deliver any sense of equality between women and men, and is set against liberal 'egalitarianism', which does.<sup>16</sup> It is a late religious equivalent of the secular theory of two unequal sexes exemplified by Rousseau. Other evangelicals have wisely moved beyond complementarity preferring to find their model for human relationships in the Persons of the Trinity (Storkey 2007: 169-172).<sup>17</sup>

#### 1.5 HETEROSEXUALITY

It is *prima facie* odd that Church documents of all denominations, while foregrounding scripture ostentatiously, rely so heavily on the nomenclature of modernity – sexuality, heterosexuality, homosexuality, orientation and so on – and more recently 'complementarity'. They sound like modernists! There has to be an historical reason why conservative Christians do this, and there is. Ever since the invention of heterosexuality in the 1892, the authority of science has been invoked to normalize it and render it compulsory. Complementarity is the new natural theology, as flawed as the one it replaces, but sounding modern. As biblical appeals to Sodom and Gomorrah and 'going after strange flesh' (Jude 7, AV) sound increasingly

---

<sup>13</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter insigniores: On the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, 1976. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1976). [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19761015\\_inter-insigniores\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html).

<sup>14</sup> House of Bishops' Group on *Issues in Human Sexuality, Some Issues in Human Sexuality: A Guide to the Debate* (London: Church House Publishing, 2003), 5.3.38, p.182.

<sup>15</sup> *Op.cit.*, 1.2.9, p.10, and 3.4.50 – 3.4.56, pp.90-91.

<sup>16</sup> Elaine Storkey, 'Evangelical Theology and Gender', in Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (ed.s), *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp.161-176 (2007); Cherith Fee Nordling, 'Gender' in Gerald R. McDermott, (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Storkey, *op.cit.*, pp. 169-172.

unconvincing, a doctrine emerges which marginalizes gay, lesbian and bi- people, supports heterosexual marriage, and requires its supporters to forget, or falsify, or deny altogether the being of intersex, third sex and transgender people.

The adoption of the language of heterosexuality brought a challenge to the churches' procreative understanding of sex in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It signalled the replacement of the procreative principle within sexual ethics by a new pleasure principle:

In the United States, in the 1890s, the 'sexual instinct' was generally identified as a *procreative* desire of men and women. But that reproductive ideal was beginning to be challenged, quietly but insistently, in practice and theory, by a new *different-sex pleasure* ethic. According to that radically new standard, the 'sexual instinct' referred to men's and women's erotic desire for each other, *irrespective of its procreative potential*.<sup>18</sup>

The churches were confronted with a dilemma. On the one hand, the new understanding of sex began to introduce a pleasure ethic they were not yet able to accept. On the other hand, heterosexuality conveniently contrasted with its opposite, 'homosexuality', and the new language made the condemnation of some non-procreative sexual acts (those between same-sex partners), easier. As the emphasis on the importance of sexual pleasure for men and women grew in the twentieth century, the churches were able to accommodate and incorporate it (albeit within marriage). That heterosexuality was about the pleasure principle was quietly forgotten: that heterosexuality was about marginalizing homosexuality was gratefully seized on and extended. The normalization of this modern nomenclature across the wide spectrum of theological and ecclesial opinion in the last fifty years, without regard to its origins, indicates a disabling amnesia at the basis of many modern pronouncements about homosexuality and heterosexuality.

On the one hand, the preservation of the ancient one-sex theory contrives to exclude women from priesthood and devalues women in millions of Protestant homes. On the other hand, the insertion of the two-sex theory into popular theology, validated not just by science but by the male God, contrives to exclude sexual minorities from full acceptance and visibility, and from marriage where appropriate and desired. Roman Catholic theology requires the one-sex theory in order to confine ordination to men. But it also requires the two-sex theory to accord to women the unconditional dignity and respect that is due to them as the baptized children of God (albeit with the restrictions that belong to female nature). I call this the 'modern mix', an incompatible blend of theories that constitutes the best the churches can do with sex/gender.

## 2. CHALLENGES

### 2.1 CHALLENGING CONSERVATIVE THEOLOGIES

---

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), p.19, author's emphasis.

It's odd that a Church that insists on priestly celibacy and controls thousands of single-sex communities throughout the world should start insisting since 1980 that a man needs a woman to be fully himself. That makes even Jesus incomplete.

Cardinal Ratzinger's letter to the bishops in 2004 insists that there is a human nature; that humans have either a male nature or a female nature; and that humans possess one or the other in an 'absolute manner'.<sup>19</sup> But the Christology of the ancient creeds made nothing of Christ's male nature or form. It was enough to confess that he became 'man' (*anthròpos, homo*). Once there are male and female natures, it follows that the male Christ has no female nature. How then can he save what he does not assume? The principle that 'The unassumed is the unhealed', first found in Gregory Nazianzen's *Epistle 101*, is 'justly famed in doctrinal history'.<sup>20</sup> While there are different interpretations of the principle today, it is fatal to any theological rationale for separate male and female natures. If Christ has no female nature, then femaleness is unhealed. If Christ has a human nature, the problem evaporates. Christ in the tradition, of course, has a divine and a human nature without further division or qualification, and by further dividing human nature the Vatican may be doing violence to the very Christology it professes. The human nature is primary, and all humans participate in it.

For the sake of even-handedness, let's also challenge the theological liberals for their handling of the text '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'. (Gal. 3:28) The likelier understanding of 'male and female' clause in Galatians is a 'unity in masculinity'<sup>21</sup> whereby, as Chrysostom taught,<sup>22</sup> 'Galatians 3:28 teaches the obsolescence of the female, not its elevation. The message is unity in masculinity, not equality between the sexes'. Variations of Galatians 3:28 'circulated in multiple contexts in the earliest movement', including *2 Clement*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, and the *Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>23</sup> We are back with the one-sex model as the ancient framework for thinking about gender. "'No male and female" promises the abolition of dimorphic sexuality, not sexual equality'.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.2 CHALLENGING SECULAR ORTHODOXIES

My challenge to secular practice lies in the sheer extent of sexual dimorphism. Mary Hawkesworth notes that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century 'the one-sex model of embodiment that had dominated European political thought and practice for nearly two millennia gave way to a two-sex model that posited men and women as incommensurate opposites rather than as embodied souls ordered along a continuum on the basis of

---

<sup>19</sup> *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (Ratzinger and Amato 2004), #3.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Wiles, *Working Papers in Doctrine* (London: SCM Press, 1976), p.108.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin H. Dunning, *Specters of Paul: Sexual Difference in Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p.6.

<sup>22</sup> Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), p.86.

<sup>23</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.32.

<sup>24</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.87.

proximity to the divine'.<sup>25</sup> If sex was once about 'embodiment' it became at this time a political and legal *category* 'that determines citizenship rights, educational and employment opportunities, levels of income and wealth, and access to prestige and power'.<sup>26</sup> Sex was no longer just a 'biological or physical characteristic'. Babies were assigned a sex before they were given a name. Modern bureaucracies affixed sexual status 'to birth certificates, passports, drivers' licenses, draft cards, credit applications, marriage licenses, and death certificates', where it 'sculpts the contours of individual freedom and belonging in ways that ensure that domination and subordination are thoroughly corporeal'. In *Redeeming Gender* I mention also how the dimorphic ideal has extended itself into clothing, fashion, hair style, popular music, the cult of celebrity, etc., and how too many women internalize the way men look at them.

### 3. THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

In this last section, I'm going to be using conventional doctrinal language – a language whose currency has been much devalued in the half century that I have been using it, and is disliked by many writers who come to similar conclusions as I do about gender, but by very different routes. I don't want to force theology on an audience that has no use for it. I *do* want to open alternative possibilities for its meaning; discomfort conservative theologians who think they hold a monopoly over its meaning; and perhaps even surprise those post-Christian persons who find they can't quite kiss theology goodbye.

#### 3.1 THE IMAGE OF GOD

Theologians of all persuasions commonly load on to Genesis 1:27 more than the text can possibly carry. They then argue variously: liberals and conservatives that two sexes exist by divine *fiat* from the beginning of time. Genesis 2 and 3, and their long and dismal heritage of interpretation, is then either ignored in the pretence that the Bible teaches two equal sexes, or invoked as a qualifier to ensure women retain a secondary and derivative status (see 1 Corinthians 11).

My approach to the *imago dei* (and to gender generally) is through the Christology of the churches and the creeds. Since God is 'beyond gender', or 'the genderful God', it is to be expected that women and men are each thought partially to reflect the divine being. It is odd that Christians, anxious to deploy the idea of the divine image in the context of gender, do not begin with the New Testament instead of the Hebrew Bible. The NT is clear. *Christ* is the image of God (Col.1: 15, 18; see also 2 Cor. 4:4). Giving priority to Christ over Adam in any appropriation of the *imago dei* should not be a controversial move. The question then arises how this New

---

<sup>25</sup> Mary Hawkesworth, 'Sex, Gender, and Sexuality: From Naturalized Presumption to Analytical Categories'. In Waylen et.al. In Georgina Waylen, Karen Celis, Johanna Kantola, and S. Laurel Weldon (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Politics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). On-line, <http://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199751457.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199751457-e-1?rskey=Ki2HKL&result=1>

<sup>26</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.31.

Testament assertion squares with the uncompromising papal insistence that Genesis 1:27 'constitutes the immutable basis of all Christian anthropology'.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.2 THE DIVINITY OF CHRIST

Ancient Christology attempted to combine three convictions, that Jesus Christ is truly human (*vere homo*), truly divine (*vere deus*), and truly one. There is much more to the being of Christ than his male body. Being fully God, Christ too in his divine nature is above distinctions of sex/gender. The metaphysical Christ, the cosmic Christ, is not sexed because He/She/It is *vere deus*, belongs to the realm of the Creator, not to the world of sexed creatures. The One Christ is one with all humanity through the human nature, and indivisibly one with God the Father and God the Spirit through the divine nature.

### 3.3 THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

I was in theological college when John Robinson's *Honest to God*<sup>28</sup> was published. Ever since, liberal Protestant theology has given much more prominence to the humanity of Jesus. Rosemary Radford Ruether's question, flung down in 1983, 'Can a Male Savior Save Women?',<sup>29</sup> belongs to the same genre. Her question has, as part of its answer, that the whole Christ is not male. The Word made flesh is the divine Word. And that leads to another remarkable feature of the creedal basis of Christianity. The Jesus of the creeds has a human nature, but he is not a human person. I saw this as a huge anomaly back in 1990 and I wrote my book *Truly a Person, Truly God*,<sup>30</sup> in an attempt to mitigate it. More than 25 years on, and in the context of a theology of gender, I now see it as a huge advantage. Because the very personhood of the Christ is divine, it is beyond the distinctions of sex/gender.

The human nature of the incarnate Word belongs to all human nature; the maleness of Jesus belongs to that nature because that nature cannot exist merely abstractly. If the divine nature is to be incarnate, it must be incarnate in a particular being that is created and sexed. The whole Christ in his/her divine being is beyond distinctions of sex, and the humanity of Christ, as tradition east and west insists, is inclusive of all humans whatsoever, for He is confessed by the Church as *homo* not *vir*, *anthròpos* not *anèr*. That the incarnate Christ was also *vir* and *anèr* cannot be doubted. What must be doubted is the over-emphasis on the maleness of Christ by derogatory one-sex and two-sex theories respectively. The one-sex theory of Catholic thought emphasizes Christ's maleness and gives the Christ a *male* nature, as well as a *human* nature. The two-sex theory of some feminist theology understandably emphasizes Christ's maleness and makes the male nature a stumbling block.

### 3.4 BEING THE BODY OF CHRIST

---

<sup>27</sup> Pope John Paul II 1988: #6.

<sup>28</sup> John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

<sup>29</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London: SCM Press 1992[1983]) p.98).

<sup>30</sup> Adrian Thatcher, *Truly a Person, Truly God* (London: SPCK, 1990).



Whereas the New Testament authors *found* the idea of the image of God in Genesis, they apply the idea not to Adam, but to Christ. Because Christ has come everything has changed. Chronologically Adam is first; ontologically Christ is first. The story of salvation is that the image of God, manifested in the first earth-creature and marred through human wilfulness, is re-presented to the world in a radically new form. The re-presentation is not a restoration of the *status quo ante* but a new, material, given manifestation of the image of God in the coming of Christ. The theological problem of gender is how the relations between men and women are transformed by sharing in Christ, the new image of God.

Let us ask how the image of God as Christ is itself reflected in and by Christian communities. Remaining with the Colossian letter, the answer the Colossian author gives is by participation in four related and overlapping entities; a new kingdom (Col. 1:13); a new creation (Col. 1:15-17); a new body (1:18), and a new humanity (Col. 3. 9-15). I will call this the 'fourfold reality'. New creation is linked with creation in Genesis by the argument of Colossians 1. The chronological and ontological priority of Christ over Adam is asserted. The Fourth Gospel makes similar claims (e.g., Jn. 1: 1-14).

The new body into which new Christians are incorporated, is, in Colossians, the church, with Christ as its head. 'He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything' (Col. 1:18). Again the prior, protological status of Christ over Adam is stressed. 'Body' or *sōma*, is another highly polyvalent term. The narrower term 'body of Christ' is said to have at least five meanings in the NT letters – the physical body that suffered on the cross; the mystical body into which Christians are incorporated; the sacramental body of bread and wine; the ecclesial body or church; and the ethical body which is the ecclesial body as it performs Christ-like activities.<sup>31</sup> There is a generous metaphorical indeterminacy about the body of Christ that literalism cannot begin to capture.

So the question arises regarding this reality: why should it be thought to be masculine, or to give priority to the masculine in any sense? Why should it incorporate the subjugations of the old order, since it exists to replace that order? What room is there in it for the power differences which have always been associated with sexual difference in a 'fallen' world? Of the five meanings of 'body of Christ' in Dinter's list, only one of these is noticeably male. The risen body of Christ is a transformed body; the mystical body while partially instantiated in worship and prayer, exists beyond even space and time; the sacramental body, being bread and wine, is genderless (and for some, miraculous); the ecclesial body cannot be male because it comprises men and women; and the ethical body is known by its practice, not by its gender. If it helps to call this concatenation of body language 'queer',<sup>32</sup> so be it. The body of Christ we may safely conclude is polymorphic. It has blurred edges and permeable boundaries. Its members are members of other bodies too. The body of Christ is both ineffably mystical and factually material, as it oscillates between the agony and

---

<sup>31</sup> Paul E. Dinter, 'Christ's Body as Male and Female', *Cross Currents*, 44.3, 1994, pp. 390-399.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Cheng, 'Contributions from Queer Theory'. In Adrian Thatcher (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp.153-169.

ecstasy of flesh, and the timeless purity of eternity. Always given, always broken, it is also our triumphant destiny, that on which, in this life, we feed in our hearts 'by faith with thanksgiving'.<sup>33</sup>

## 4. CONCLUSION

I don't think Christians need to answer the question 'How many sexes are there?' because it is not a theological question. We do need to deconstruct the binary of opposite sexes and emphasize our human similarities. I argue for a human 'continuum', i.e., 'a sequence in which adjacent elements are not perceptibly different from each other, but the extreme are quite distinct'. The continuum, it should be noted, provides a home for intersex, third sex and transgender people in a way the binary does not. The two sex theory was intended to keep men dominant and women in their place. By 'redeeming gender' I mean that Christ has redeemed the relations between women and men. How? By founding, grounding, and leading the 'fourfold reality' and inviting everyone to share in it. At last in this new body sexual difference becomes harmless, no longer a power-play, because there is 'no longer male and female' (Gal. 3:28).

© Adrian Thatcher

University of Exeter, 2017

---

<sup>33</sup> 'Service of Holy Communion', *Common Worship* (2000).[Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.](#)