

Introducing the Category of Gender to Roman Catholic Theology – a Liberal Approach

By Angelika Walser

This contribution⁴⁹ outlines the status quo, the basic difficulties, and the implications of the category of gender being introduced to traditional Roman Catholic theology. In contrast to the anxiety the introduction of gender has provoked in official documents of the Catholic Church, my contribution aims to emphasize the positive inspiration which goes along with this new hermeneutical and analytical category, seen from a liberal feminist point of view. It entails the rediscovery of the meaning of the vulnerable body and the need for the protection of its integrity as a universal starting point for cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue.

1. Introduction

Reflecting upon gender⁵⁰, sexuality, and the human body is still a risky endeavor in Roman Catholic theology. The introduction of the category of gender began in the 70's of the last century, when feminist theologians developed an alternative vision for the flourishing of both men *and* women, taking women's oppression in society and in church as a starting point. Since then, the "gender-landscape" of Roman Catholic theology has changed to a greater or lesser degree in various cultures and countries. While feminism in the United States has gained substantial influence on theological thinking as a whole, feminist theology and gender studies still live at the margins of theology in most European countries, struggle with prejudice and silent or open

⁵⁷ Thanks to Lisa S. Cahill (Boston College) for her comments on a first version of this contribution.

⁵⁸ Being a German-speaking author, I ought to make some defining remarks about the term "gender" in German theology. As many other German-speaking authors do, I use the term "gender" as a translation of the German word *Geschlecht*. In contrast to the English language, the German word *Geschlecht* refers to both to cultural *and* social difference. There have been attempts to introduce *Geschlechtlichkeit* as a German addition to gender, referring to social difference, while *Geschlecht* refers to biological difference. However, at least in the theological discourse, this distinction is not used.

In my contribution I refer to gender (*Geschlecht*) as a universal category of analysis structuring societies, cultures and, of course, theology. Thus *Geschlecht* becomes the object of investigation *and* a universal perspective at the same time, laying the foundation of a "*geschlechterbewusste Theologie* – a theology which is aware of the meaning of gender" (Schnabl & Lehner 2006, 319-343).

opposition, and are not solidly established within theological studies.⁵¹ Obviously, there is a connection between the spread of the category of gender and the fact that, in the English-speaking world, many women have gained high positions at faculties of Roman Catholic theology. In European countries such women are still quite a rare species, whose minority is a salient factor.

Although I do not want to claim that each female theologian is “by nature” driven to research on questions of feminism and gender, I assume that the subjects of theology are not neutral subjects. They are men and women whose socialization differs in many ways. Using the category of gender has implications both for the choice of *objects* of investigation and for *subjects* doing theology. Regarding the latter, Roman Catholic theology is not only shaped by male theologians but also mostly by priests who are part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy – a powerful structure which influences the choice of issues, methodology, and the general mentality of discussion.

2. Gender, Body and Traditional Roman Catholic Theology: Engaging Basic Problems

The story of gender is questioned today “not because the history of the story is completely false, but because the message of the story is problematic. No one doubts that human persons are in some sense gendered, but what this means and whether or why it is important are disputed questions” (Farley 2008, 134). The times seem long ago when feminist writers distinguished sex (a biological category) from gender (a cultural category). Postmodern thinkers such as Judith Butler have stated that not only gender but also sex is socially and culturally constructed (Butler 2006). One could almost get the impression that the study of gender is “just another fashion which will go by soon,” and not worth taking seriously. In fact, the question of what it means to act responsibly as a gendered person, as a man or as a woman, has just arrived in theological ethics and is far from being answered (Heimbach-Steins 2009, 314).

Searching for an answer to this question, one has to face the fact that there is not *one* feminist Christian ethics but many different ones. According to Parson’s “Feminism and Christian ethics” (1996), there are three models used by feminist theologians doing ethics: the liberal paradigm, emphasizing the equality of men and women and trying to discover a universal, rational truth which ultimately aims to transcend differences; the social constructionist paradigm, focusing on gender as socially-constructed, thus emphasizing the necessity of critical analysis, subversion, and transformation of the social conditions and institutions which undermine women’s flourishing; and the

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naturalist paradigm which assumes that there is a kind of biological substratum to which gender differences are intrinsically connected, although this assumption does *not* imply any subordination of one gender to the other.

Although these three paradigms differ from each other significantly in the way they assess gender differences and define gender-sex-correlation, they all have to overcome *two* barriers, when it comes to introducing gender to traditional Roman Catholic theology: (1) the long tradition of devaluation of the body, especially the female body, and (2) the concept of bipolar or binary complementarity. According to the official Roman Catholic doctrine there are *two* sexes, male and female, which are the basis for clear masculine and feminine gender differences. Although both barriers touch on different aspects of reality, they are not independent from each other.

In spite of dramatic changes in the official documents on sexuality since Vatican II⁵² and in spite of a heritage which includes positive interpretations of the human body (e.g. the concepts of creation and incarnation), Roman Catholic tradition is still carrying the heavy burden of a long history of devaluing the human body, especially the female body, whose desires and sexuality have to be disciplined by strict norms. Multiple reasons have been named for this ambivalence (or even animosity) towards body and sexuality which can be outlined here only very briefly:

Firstly, there is a certain tendency in the Scriptures of the New Testament itself to devalue issues of the body, e.g. sexuality, reproduction and family. The expectancy of the dawning of God's Kingdom rendered "family matters" less important than matters of discipleship and the preparation for a new order in Jesus Christ, represented in the celibate body.⁵³ *Secondly*, the ambivalence arises from the encounter of early Christianity with gnostic and neoplatonic theories, in which the body was an inferior container for soul and mind. Up to today, the Western mentality is characterized by this separation of two totally different entities, respectively body and soul/mind, shaping not only theology and philosophy but also secular institutions like modern medicine, which follow the Cartesian view of the body as machine.

The ambivalence towards the human body and the special misogyny which is documented widely in feminist analysis today⁵⁴ is the consequence of a larger symbolic binary system which has constructed the body within a rigid dualistic structure, which is

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⁵³ Gal 3: 28 "There is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (New Revised Standard Version) can be interpreted as expressing a certain distance towards sex and marriage, although there are other possibilities (Farley 2008, 142f.).

⁵⁴ See, for example, a detailed analysis in Ladner 2002.

itself a proof for the justification of social construction theories. This dualism identifies “being a man” with “mind, intellect, activity and autonomy” (i.e. superiority) while “being a woman” is identified with “body, emotion, passivity and care” (i.e. inferiority). Although neither theological experts nor lay people would agree with a moral hierarchy of men over women, the binary system as such has survived until today and is still the common, shaping Catholic mentality. Its success is partially due to the fact that Western society as a whole has given this binary system a secular home, thus reinforcing the separation of the public realm for men and the private realm for women since the 18th century. However, this secular order has become unstable nowadays and is shattered by fundamental changes, especially by emancipation and women’s call for autonomy.

Vatican II documents like *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) or *Pacem in terris* (1963) have responded to these changes, trying to conceptualize the relationship of man and woman in a new way – based on equality, mutuality, and partnership – without clinging to the old pattern of bipolarity and the subordination of women (Heimbach-Steins 2009, 21-90). However, while clearly rejecting the subordination of women and patriarchy as sinful (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 10), the so-called “complementarity model” is the widely accepted bulwark of Roman Catholic doctrine on gender relations, insisting on the popular formula “equal but *different*”. So far the critique of feminist theologians has not been effective: They pointed out that the rhetoric quality of the argument in fact veiled the missing reference point: “equal referring to what? different referring to what?” They detected that this argument has always been used to perpetuate tradition “the way it has always been,” helping to stabilize things instead of changing them. Last but not least, they call attention to the limits which the model of complementarity imposes on both men *and* women, freezing gender stereotypes forever instead of enabling men and women to develop their capacities. It was especially Pope John Paul II who – in many documents like *Mulieris dignitatem* (1988) – unfolded the view of the woman and her ethical vocation to make the world a better place, to be the world’s peace keeper, its hope and consolation. The foundations for the “otherness of woman” and her ethical qualities are laid in essentialist presumptions about “woman’s nature” ultimately derived from women’s capacity to give birth to children, thereby determining that women are “relational beings” who meet their ultimate personal destination in biological or spiritual motherhood. Thus, motherly virtues like caring for others and the self-sacrifice of women for the flourishing of their dependents is esteemed highly within the church and embodied in Mary, Jesus’ Mother and Mother of the Church (Schneider 1997, 155-167).

It was in 2004 that the binary model of complementarity was affirmed once more by the *Letter to the bishops of the catholic church on the collaboration of men and women in the church and in the world*. According to this document, complementarity, based on biological differences between man and woman, is established as part of God’s creation and is of psychological and even ontological quality (*ibid.* Nr. 12). Any attempt

to question this complementarity by introducing gender as a social and cultural category seems to have devastating consequences for the order of church and society.⁵⁵

What are the practical consequences of the binary system and its dualism for theology today? As a moral theologian I can illustrate the consequence by giving two examples from my own discipline:

Firstly, while usually abandoning a definition of men's role, the dualism of the binary system defines the role and tasks of women very clearly, providing a rigid anthropological subtext for ethics that makes it difficult to introduce and apply "male-associated" principles and capacities like autonomy and agency to women's ethical decision-making. Referring to bioethical questions like Artificial Reproductive Technologies (ARTS), preimplantation diagnosis, prenatal diagnostics and – at the core – the question of abortion, Vatican documents like *Donum Vitae* (1987) or *Dignitas Personae* (2008) and the huge majority of moral theologians have concentrated on the embryo, isolated from its "motherly surroundings." This separation has entailed elaborate arguments on the ontological and moral status of the embryo and its potential autonomy, while the autonomy of *women* in bioethical decision-making has not been a subject at all and has been exclusively presented as a threat to the life of the unborn.

Only in the last ten years, with the dawning of the era of biotechnology, have feminist theologians started to reflect anew and thoroughly upon this category and its meaning for women, rejecting unanimously a naïve and too simple definition of autonomy as "free choice." However, they insist on women being not only untouched "recipients of life", but also moral subjects, challenged by the task to make responsible decisions about their bodies and their futures within the necessarily contingent boundaries of their freedom. New approaches towards women's autonomy neither exclude the rights of the embryo nor care for the unborn child, but they do exclude a view on the "gift of life" which encourages its spread without considering the part of women. The shortcomings of the complementarity model and its essentialist conception of the woman are obvious. On the one hand, it holds on to an idealized version of femininity, while on the other hand it disregards the needs and questions of real women.

Secondly, the complementarity model imposes another huge barrier for moral theology: its binary structure excludes both human beings which are neither entirely

⁵⁵ "In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed *sex*, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed *gender*, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels. This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from biological determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality." (*Letter to the bishops of the Catholic church on the collaboration of men and women in the church and in the world*, Nr. 2).

male nor entirely female, and homosexual relationships. If both phenomena are not to be labeled as “psychological dysfunction” or “immoral behavior” (which is not appropriate according to scientific knowledge in biology, sexology and psychology), there has to be at least some kind of discussion whether the model of heterosexual complementarity is more a “cultural” than a “natural” paradigm. However, there are only a few moral theologians who have either recognized or taken a chance of engaging this taboo, most of them coming from the United States.⁵⁶

3. The Introduction of Gender and its Implications

Introducing the category of gender as a hermeneutical and analytical category entails questioning the dualistic framework I have tried to outline above and the essentialist definitions it entails, thus opening the horizon for redefining the relationship between man and woman (and perhaps another gender) on the basis of true equality, mutual respect, care and justice for *both* of them. Instead of affirming stereotypes that confine the flourishing of women *and* men, the category of gender the way I understand it⁵⁷ aims both to respect difference *and* search for common ground between all human beings. It is a category of liberation rather than one of restriction, and enables human persons to develop their potential.

Engaging taboos usually creates fear and anxiety. It is, therefore, not surprising that there are new alliances against the so-called “genderism or gender-ideology”, e.g. in European countries like Germany or Austria. Their members – many of them women – can be usually found in neoconservative groups which have gained important influence on religious life in these countries. Referring especially to John Paul II, they accuse genderism/feminism of playing down the difference between man and woman (Burggraf 2007, 295). In fact, where the gender category has appeared in theology, it has done the contrary.

Generally speaking, it has created a new awareness for the gender-related experiences of women and men in all theological disciplines. Feminist studies of the Scripture and historical studies have brought about new insights in forgotten or

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⁵⁷ I am aware of the fact that there are gynocentric approaches which try to reevaluate women’s experience as feminine experience, shared exclusively by women, thus creating new essentialist approaches and abandoning any universal claim.

unknown traditions of imaging God, using or transcending gender related images.⁵⁸ Women have started to discover new forms of liturgy according to their own bodily experiences. Unfortunately, many of these attempts to find new ways and express faith in a new form have been pushed out of or started outside of existing parochial structures, at least in Europe. Thus, many feminist groups have lost (or never had) connections to and influence on the majority of traditional church members. In most European countries, both groups tend to pursue their own goals and are not able to inspire one another, thereby sharing the dynamic power of the new and the valuable traditions of the old. Instead, the average parish in Europe tends to worship a neutral and somehow featureless “loving God” without even knowing about the richness of tradition, calling him/her “Mother”, “Sophia”, “Caritas”, “Fountain of life” etc.

The results of this spiritual loss can be found not only in diminishing membership and the disappearance of young women in Roman Catholic Church, among many other groups. There is also a consequence for theology as the systematic reflection of faith, because practice and theory are interwoven with each other. That is, there is a connection between the way God is worshipped in practice and which ethical challenges are given priority by a community. A God-Father who reigns in glory on his throne is not likely to inspire a church to foster equality in society and church for both women and men. Hence, introducing the gender category to theology is not a question of “spiritual edification for some intellectual feminist” but of vital importance to the faith and the ethos of the community of the church in general. Finally, it raises the question of which message the church has to tell the global society of the 21st century.

For the two theological disciplines, moral theology and social ethics, gender entails a critical review and reformulation of principles and virtues like justice, care (Schnabl 2005) and autonomy. It comprises a hermeneutic of suspicion towards the universality of ethical theory in general, thus disclosing androcentric presuppositions which have not taken into consideration different gender-related experiences.

The challenge, however, is twofold. On one hand gender has to matter, because the experience of gender difference is still part of everyday life and still plays an important role in ordering societies, cultures, and religions. This is especially evident where gender difference is used to legitimate the marginalization and the subordination of women. Here, thorough gender analysis is needed urgently and maybe – in this practical sense – it deserves even more special attention than other categories such as race and class.

However, I mentioned above that, while the gender category has not even arrived fully within the church, it has already been deconstructed outside the church. Thus,

⁵⁸ See the innovative project “*Bibel in gerechter Sprache*” which united feminist and traditional theologians to engage in a new translation of the bible which is both just towards gender and just towards Jewish traditions. For further details see bibliography.

feminist theologians doing ethics have to face two challenges. They have to insist on critical gender analysis being done within the church and theology itself. At the same time, they have to transcend gender to develop an ethics which is able to formulate universal claims, because – at least from my point of view – this universalism is inherent to a feminist position and, therefore, ought not to be given up. A feminism which does not feel obliged to universal claims tends to forget about its first goal, the flourishing of women in *every* religion, culture and nation with respect to its particularities. Searching for a common ground of universal morality, it is the human body which is rediscovered in feminist theology, yet “purified” by the encounter with postmodern thinking and interpreted in a new way.

4. The Rediscovery of the Body as a Common Reference Point for Inter-religious Dialogue

Until very recently, the reclamation and the revaluation of women’s bodies seemed to be the appropriate answer to a patriarchal heritage which had alienated women from their bodies for centuries. Gender and sex served as a source of feminine knowledge and experience which seemed to have the power to unite women in cross-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. However, as Margaret Farley has pointed out, postmodern approaches, the most radical being Judith Butler’s “Gender Trouble,” have distrusted this “grand narrative.” They put an end to a naïve perception of the body as “natural” reference point: “That which had been considered most ‘natural’, abstracted as it was from women’s experience and therefore easily universalized by its interpreters, now seems almost completely subject to social construction for its meaning. The last bastion for some version of universal morality seems lost before sustained feminist critique” (Farley 1993, 176).

The consequences of this postmodern loss of experience and the loss of the body have been demonstrated by many feminists, not only feminist theologians. In fact, ethics itself has somehow come to an end. For example Cristina Traina has shown that, at the end of the day, Butler’s framework makes moral distinction impossible. If neither body nor experience is a legitimate source for moral reflection, “then the entire subject matter of practical moral reason disappears ... This inability to make moral distinctions threatens to shipwreck feminism precisely because feminism entails a commitment to political liberation. That is, feminism exists to free women from human oppression and, more broadly, from all sources that prevent their flourishing. In order to accomplish this task, feminism needs some relatively stable point of critical leverage, some point beyond which systems and behaviors are clearly wrong” (Traina 1999, 5).

Obviously, body theory has become the crucial point for ethics. I agree with Traina that a feminist ethics which doesn’t want to give in to particularism and tries to hold on to some “universally shareable” rights claims needs a “normative description of embodied human life” (ibid. 6). However, we cannot fall back behind postmodern

approaches. Thus, the big challenge is to back up universal claims with a consistent theory which is capable of covering both formal universalism and material particularism, the latter starting with the different and contextual experiences of a female or male body (respectively bodies which are neither entirely male nor entirely female). Yet many feminist theologians agree with Farley that “while there is something fundamentally contextual about the experience of embodiment, feminists have universalized bodily integrity as reality and a value that ought not to be violated” (Farley 1993, 180).

Farley refers to Martha Nussbaum, who has tried to find a common conception of the human being that goes beyond particularity and contextuality. Nussbaum puts on top of her list the vulnerability of the body: “The experience of the body is culturally shaped, to be sure; the importance we ascribe to its various functions is also culturally shaped. But the body itself, not culturally variant in its nutritional and other related requirements, sets limits on what can be experienced and valued, ensuring a great deal of overlap” (Nussbaum 1995, 76). Even if the question remains open as to how much of human experience is rooted in the body, the suffering human body seems to be a vivid reminder of the need for universal protection, including a specific attention to the assaults on women’s bodies in all cultures and religions. The vulnerable body therefore becomes a cross-cultural and inter-religious reference point. The discussion about the circumcision of women that has gone on in the last few years is a good example of a call for universal respect for the bodily integrity of all persons on one hand and for sensitivity for different cultures and traditions on the other. Christian and Islamic ethicists can agree on the necessity of protecting women from practices that severely damage their health or put their lives at risk. The goal of preventing harm is shared by Islamic law and Christian bioethics. Yet the fact that circumcision is embedded in a cultural context which is shaped by male/female complementarity, regarding circumcision as a mark of respect for women, has entailed a compromise which makes relatively mild forms of circumcision for ethical experts of both religions acceptable⁵⁹ “to enact some religiously or culturally sanctioned values” (Gudorf 2002, 338).

The contextual sensitivity which is required in case of circumcision also draws attention to the cultural context in the Western world where an increasing number of young women undergo vaginal cosmetic surgery in order to satisfy internalized standards of sexual attractiveness of their own culture. Patriarchal norms are inscribed in the female body, diminishing the flourishing of women everywhere. This fact calls for a reaction of the different religions, including self-critique of their past and a search for a way to contribute in the future to this flourishing. As for Roman Catholic theological

⁵⁹ See the Christian and the Islamic plea for compromise on a case study of circumcision in Senegal (Wentzel Wolfe & Gudorf 1999, 23-33) and another comment by Gudorf 2002, 1-21.

ethics, it is challenged to develop a gender-adequate concept of autonomy for women which comprises the self-possession of their own bodies as well as care and responsibility for the own bodily self, a version of autonomy which is more a habit in the sense of virtue ethics than a right in the liberal sense, and which includes the capacity of being critical and resistant to culturally oppressive norms.

Thus, inter-religious dialogue can increase awareness of deficiencies within one's own concepts of gender, and can call for a theological body-discourse that relies on positive interpretations of the body within Christian community (Ammicht-Quinn 2004). Within this theological body-discourse, gender as a part of embodied experience is both taken seriously and transcended at the same time. Yet it remains an open question whether and when this discourse starts to transform theology as a whole, recognizing the meaning of gender experience for the moral agency of men and women and their responsibility for the future of this world.

Clarifications and Acknowledgements

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As a point of fact, German-speaking countries have installed a few chairs (e.g. Bonn and Muenster) and have started to establish interdisciplinary gender studies (e.g. Vienna, Graz, Innsbruck, Luzern), but in many Eastern European countries the gender category has not arrived at all.

Additional Notes

1. I am referring to the fact that, according to *Gaudium et Spes* 49, conjugal sexuality is not only bound to serve “procreativity,” but also to the “mutual enrichment” of the married couple, thus breaking with a long tradition of subordinating the joyous aspects of sexuality to the “good of procreativity.”
2. Gal 3: 28 “There is no longer male and female: for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (New Revised Standard Version) can be interpreted as expressing a certain distance towards sex and marriage, although there are other possibilities (Farley 2008, 142f.).
3. I recommend seeing, for example, a detailed analysis in Ladner 2002.
4. “In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this

perspective, physical difference, termed *sex*, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed *gender*, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels. This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from biological determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.” (*Letter to the bishops of the Catholic church on the collaboration of men and women in the church and in the world*, Nr. 2).

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7. I suggest reading the innovative project “*Bibel in gerechter Sprache*” which united feminist and traditional theologians to engage in a new translation of the bible which is both just towards gender and just towards Jewish traditions. For further details see bibliography.

8. See the Christian and the Islamic plea for compromise on a case study of circumcision in Senegal (Wentzel Wolfe & Gudorf 1999, 23-33) and another comment by Gudorf 2002, 1-21.

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