

Does Gender Have a Future?

Sex makes everything more complicated. Even not having it, because the not having it . . . makes it complicated.
—Amanda, *The Holiday*, directed by Nancy Meyers

THE IDEAL OF ASCETICISM (and a sign of perfection), inspired and reflected in the Gospel, is to not divide people on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The story of the monk who on a certain journey met desert-dwelling nuns is very indicative. Seeing them, he left the road and gave them a wide berth. The abbess invited him over to herself and reproached him with the following words: “If you were a perfect monk, you would not have seen us as women.”¹

The specter of gender is one of the most persistent cultural problems. Many have entered into an alliance to exorcise this specter: conservative politicians, some clergy, radical intellectuals, and moralists of all kinds and fashions. On the other side, almost in the same number, are those who have embraced it, fashioning a romantic “gender identity,” even a “theology of gender.” Clearly, this problem is partly due to the existing confusion between the concepts of sex (which is biologically based) and gender (which is psychosocially based). What would be an Orthodox approach to this problem?

Male and female cannot easily be reconciled. Are they not mutually inclusive and exclusive at the same time? Is it not true that the male, by

¹Cf. Susanna Elm, “*Virgins of God*”: *The Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 267.

definition, is the opposite sex/gender² of the female (and vice versa) and that their relationship is so *problematic* that it is closely linked with the “ancestral sin” of the biblical account? One could say that the fall (the original problem between man and God and between and among humans) leads to a gender identity crisis and to an obvious *rupture* between the genders.

How does theology look upon gender, on the otherness of gender, and, consequently, on gender-based relations? That this rupture between the sexes seems to have driven human history from the very beginning indicates that it is a part of man’s *natural* state.³ Yannaras remarks that “nature is skillful in the tricks she plays with the unconscious. She plays the game of self-interest even with the mode of virtue.”⁴ It would take an entire volume to describe this reality, a reality to which our culture subscribes in many ways. Biology and nature also confirm that this is a *universal*, almost pathological, problem.⁵ Almost everything that exists, whether consciously, unconsciously, or even nonconsciously, undergoes and “suffers” this discord.⁶ It is now widely accepted not merely that men and women (and also boys and

²The word for this in Slavonic, “*pol*,” implies an inevitable attraction, almost a magnetic one, like “polarity” in chemistry.

³We will discuss sexuality as a *social* construction later. “Because sexuality is a social construction, individuals as individuals are not free to experience *eros* just as they choose. Yet just as the extraction and appropriation of surplus value by the capitalist represents a choice available, if not to individuals, to society as a whole, so too sexuality and the forms taken by *eros* must be seen as at some level open to change” (N. Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power* [Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1985], 178).

⁴Christos Yannaras, *Variations on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2005), 125.

⁵See below our further consideration of the connection between nature, death, sex, and sexual reproduction, based on Zizioulas and the modern biologist Clark (*Sex and the Origins of Death*), in Zizioulas, “On Being Other,” in *Communion and Otherness*, 58–61.

⁶Cf. Zizioulas’s remarks in “On Being Other,” in *Communion and Otherness*, 57.

girls, and even animals) are programmed to behave differently' from one another, but also that the sexual *division* (not only difference⁸) is part of the very foundation of our civilization. All of nature acts in such a way that these distinctions become dialectically opposed. Academics still debate which of the differences between the sexes are "biological"⁹—in the sense that they have been honed by evolution—and which are "cultural" or "environmental" and might more easily be altered by changed circumstances.¹⁰

Questioning the Ontology of Gender

In an attempt to provide a critical analysis of the otherness of gender from the ontological perspective of Eastern Orthodox theology, we here endeavor to present the ecclesial and patristic standpoint on the theological perspective on gender (i.e., culturally and historically based differences in the roles, attitudes, and behaviors of men and

⁷When boys and girls are born, they are already different, and they favor different toys from the beginning ("The Mismeasure of Woman," *Economist*, August 3, 2006).

⁸Here we intentionally say "division" and not "difference" because the latter is blessed, while the former is pathological. Zizioulas finds the most analytical articulation of this view in St Maximus the Confessor (see below).

⁹For example, men and women seem to perceive pain in different ways; "that may mean they sometimes need different pain-relief drugs" ("Sex and Drugs," *Economist*, July 21, 2005).

¹⁰See, for example, Georgia Warnke, *Debating Sex and Gender* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Biological explanations of human behavior are making a comeback as the generation of academics who feared them as a covert way of justifying eugenics, or of thwarting Marxist utopianism, retire. The success of neo-Darwinism has provided an intellectual underpinning for the discussion about *why some differences between the sexes might be innate*. And new scanning techniques have enabled researchers to examine the brain's interior as it works, showing that male and female brains do, at one level, operate differently. The results, however, do not always support past clichés about what the differences in question actually are.

women), which is a greatly important, yet neglected, subject within Orthodox theology. This study traces the relationship between communion and otherness, questioning the ontology of gender and sex. The starting points are the biblical references to God's creation of man and attaching him to the other gender, then *detaching* him from gender (as a condition *sine qua non* for the Kingdom, i.e., the eschaton), and finally *reattaching* (recapitulation) *all* in Christ¹¹ as the Other *par excellence*. The ontology of communion and otherness¹² is at the center of the theological project of Metropolitan John Zizioulas, and here we will explore aspects of his theology that should be more influential in the modern theological discussion about gender and, furthermore, where his work could fruitfully complete the contributions of other theologians. Zizioulas, arguably the most influential Orthodox theologian of the past and current century, has transfused the implications of patristic theology into contemporary theology more than any other modern theologian. He has the great gift of very clearly summarizing various patristic theories and academic studies into a single, holistic perspective.

We'll also discuss this subject with regard to the testimony of the contemporary Christian Church in our postmodern world.¹³ Like the

¹¹Cf. "In the beginning He made them male and female . . . For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be *joined to his wife*: and the two shall become one flesh" (Mt 19.5); as opposed to the Christological perspective: "And every one who has *left* . . . [his] *wife* . . . for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, [and] *inherit eternal life*" (cf. Mt 19.29; Mk 10.29–30; Lk 14–26; 18.29–30); "And Jesus said to them, 'The sons of *this age* marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection'" (Lk 20.34–36).

¹²He develops it in many of his studies, but most analytically in his book *Communion and Otherness*.

¹³See, for example, John Zizioulas, *Ὁρθοδοξία καὶ σύγχρονος κόσμος* [Orthodoxy and the Modern World] (Nicosia, 2006).

Church Fathers, especially the Cappadocians, the goal of modern theology should be to interpret the Gospel existentially and contextually by entering into a deep dialogue with the surrounding culture and the philosophy of science. A modern theologian should never write without considering the implication of his or her words for modern man. *Theology* is that much more precious when we consider that it is the only decisive means of dealing with the problem of gender, because the arguments of Tradition alone do not sufficiently address it.¹⁴

Let's Not Sexualize It!

There is no doubt that the current problem between the genders is a direct result of what, in theological language, we call the “fall of man.” No matter how we understand the “fall,” since the first humans (Adam and Eve), an abnormality has been built into the very roots of our existence and inherited through our birth. This is the fear of the “opposite other.” And this fear has become second nature. Cultural stereotyping is an unlikely explanation for this entire universal “abnormality.” John Zizioulas argues that this is a result of the first man’s rejection of the Other *par excellence*: our Creator. The essence of the first-created couple’s “ancestral sin” is fear of the Other,¹⁵ which is part of the rejection of God. Once the affirmation of the “self” (“*you will be like God*” from Genesis 3.3) is realized through the rejection of the Other (rejection of *ekstasis* and submission to the dictates of nature)—what Adam, in his freedom, chose to do—it is only natural for the other to become an enemy and a threat. A theological and existential consequence of this

¹⁴Zizioulas characteristically notes, “Past positions of the Church, which were based upon the society and culture of the time, cannot simply be transferred to all societies and cultures of other time periods, dissociated from their respective theological context” (*Orthodoxy and the Modern World*, 37).

¹⁵Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 1–2.

is that *reconciliation* with God is a necessary precondition for reconciliation with any “other,”¹⁶ gender otherness included.

The opposition and bipolarity (and not simply differences or distinctions) between masculinity and femininity, since it is a problem of our *nature*, has naturally become part of our culture: differences between the sexes are so often popularized and played up in the popular media that people tend to pay them disproportionate attention. All this implies that our culture cultivates a taboo vis-à-vis the opposite gender—with all the attendant attraction and hidden charms, as well. This taboo says that no human being is dispassionate or disinterested with regard to the gender opposite of his own (although homosexuals deny this). We feel more and more dependent on the presence of the opposite sex. At the same time, we are forced and even encouraged to consider the opposite sex more as a *temptation* than as a *blessing* (a friend or fellow man). In the film *Collateral Beauty*,¹⁷ Whit asks Amy if he can kiss her, and she responds, “Let’s not sexualize it.” An identity constructed on gender identity proves problematic. And it will continue to be challenging, because it does not lead to a *free* relational mode of existence and an identity free from the dictates of nature.

What is the problem with nature? As the modern theologian Christos Yannaras observes:

Our human nature plays a game of self-interest with the mode of life, pursuing the mode of life in the delusion of love. There is no love which does not pass through phases of sacrificial self-denial and total self-offering. In fact, phases of life become nature’s weapon for winning the other, for possessing him, for making him our own. With these weapons nature defends its interests,

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷*Collateral Beauty*, directed by David Franke (Burbank, CA: New Line Cinema, 2016), film.

prepares positions for attack, when the other begins to reveal himself through his own natural needs and independent desires.¹⁸

But is it correct to say that gender relationships do not lead to a free relational ontology? Why is the transcendence of gender identity's exclusiveness necessary? Zizioulas, for one, doesn't seem willing to rephrase his observations "on the other" in order to formulate the relationship between the genders, male-female. But, why?

Interaction with the (opposite) gender is *natural* (i.e., based on nature, not person) as well as "mechanical." There is nothing more *natural*, and thus inevitable, than to desire the *other* based on gender identity.¹⁹ It would be *unnatural* to avoid this interaction; *almost all*²⁰ animals, humans included, are *not* hypocritical either in or with their

¹⁸Yannaras, *Variations*, 14.

¹⁹See below our further elaboration of this.

²⁰Certainly, there exist in nature examples of sexually *indifferent* beings (so-called single-celled microorganisms and, indeed, some people) but this does not deny the general principle. Asexual reproduction is not, however, limited to single-celled organisms. Sexual reproduction typically requires the involvement of two individuals or gametes, one from each opposite type of sex. On the other hand, some of the species that are capable of reproducing asexually, like hydra, yeast, and jellyfish, may also reproduce sexually. The existence of life without reproduction was the subject of some speculation until recently when C. Venter and H. Smith, the two American biologists, made a bacterium that has an artificial genome—creating a living creature with no ancestor. This will be a real challenge for theology: the possibility—through synthetic biology—of creating new, useful organisms. Evolution by artificial selection is likely to prove almost as wasteful as the kind by natural selection (there are those that worry about the proliferation of gene synthesis). But almost all technologies can be used for ill as well as good. The ability to make genomes, coupled to a far greater understanding of how they lead to the structures of complex organisms, could one day allow simulacra of such creatures to be made by synthetic biology. In any case, though dinosaurs have left no usable DNA, other more recently departed creatures have been more generous. Imagine, e.g., allying synthetic biology with the genome of Neanderthal man and comparing this with the DNA of modern humans, in the hope of finding the essential differences between the two (See "Genesis Redux," *Economist*, March 20, 2010). But will someone dare to create a Neanderthal and ask him?

sexuality (this is valid even for homosexual relationships, for reasons that will be discussed elsewhere). They are *biologically* concerned with and apprehensive about sex. Temptations (dangers or challenges) are implicit in the presence of the (opposite) sex, but there is nothing more natural than to exercise sexuality, since the other—either he or she—is useful for both the biological and social happiness of the individual. “From a generalized biological perspective (one which applies to all mammals), an individual of the opposite sex becomes an object of the sex drive to the degree which the individual is offered for the attainment of pleasure.”²¹

However, it is not possible to have an ontology of sexuality for two reasons. First, it is a *natural* fact that does not allow a *relational* otherness to survive as ever-being (ἀεί εἶναι). And second, it does not belong to the eschatological state of being.²² This is consistent with Zizioulas’s main axiom: “Only that which survives at the end possesses true being.”²³

A Wild Cat of Insatiable Appetite

As we suggested earlier, the essential “sin” of gender consists in its incapacity to overcome the inherent natural law present in it, which is primarily oriented toward maximizing reproduction. Every aspect of the male-female relationship is a result of given biological laws. Every particular gender coming into existence is *tuned* “to bring about other

²¹Christos Yannaras, *Relational Ontology* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 24.

²²See Mt 22.30. Also: “The sons of *this age* marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to *that age* and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for *they cannot die any more*, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being *sons of the resurrection*” (Lk 20.34–36).

²³Zizioulas, “On Being Other,” in *Communion and Otherness*, 68n156.

particularities which would secure the survival of the species.”²⁴ This mechanism is tied up with the process of death, as modern biology confirms today.²⁵ This leads us to conclude that there is a deficient ontology present in gender. Subsequently, every form of sexuality has emerged from the “natural” instinctive need of man to provide a prolongation of himself. Sexuality primarily comes out of the need for physiological reassurance that man’s ego will “be saved,” even if only in the form of his alter-ego (for example, his descendants), thus remaining in existence in eternity. This would allow us to argue that same-sex marriage is not acceptable (i.e., is not “natural”) not only because it is perverted or fails to serve any natural purpose, but because it serves an intrinsic *self-love*, which is related to death. For now, we can affirm that since this relationship is not “*tuned*” to bring about other particularities through reproduction—as is the case with the male-female relation—its main goal is exclusively a *hedonistic* one; φιλαυτία, or self-love, has invented again another clever way to achieve pleasure. “The ego is a wild cat of insatiable appetite,” Yannaras concludes.²⁶

The problem with the deficient ontology of gender is that relational otherness cannot emerge whenever a *natural quality* is both *archē* and *telos*. The gender relation—although an exciting and promising revelation of otherness²⁷—turns out to be a manifestation of utter

²⁴Ibid., 58. This assertion might be supported by a recent discovery. “One of the great clichés of animal behavior in the context of evolution is that animals act for the good of the species. This idea was discredited in the 1960s but continues to permeate *Wild Kingdom*-like versions of animal behavior. The more accurate view is that animals usually behave in ways that maximize their own reproduction and the reproduction of their close relatives” (Robert Sapolsky, *The Trouble with Testosterone* [New York: Scribner, 1998], 84).

²⁵Zizioulas uses the exploration of biologist W. R. Clark. Cf. “On Being Other,” n. 134.

²⁶Yannaras, *Variations*, 93.

²⁷Cf. Yannaras’s observations on the ecstatic (from the Greek *ekstasis*, “standing

individualism (and naturalism) and not of an affirmed otherness. Eros as sexual attraction is always about feelings and emotions, or goodness, and can be found in the entire animal world, although only in humans embodied in the *self*. (It is interesting that in animals, sexuality is not connected with self, nor is it embodied in the desire of ego.) Gender's "otherness" is always generated or caused by nature and aims at and "rests" in nature. The aesthetic attraction in gender relations serves only as camouflage²⁸ or decoration, an additional decorative accessory, as a seduction for the final goal: either *reproduction* or the pleasure of self-love. Through evolutionary reflexes of self-preservation and self-survival (of which seduction is one of the components), many species have developed various forms to facilitate this process, so that humankind with such a bodily shape or *eidos* seduces the other gender: "the *desire* for life-in-itself clothes itself in the sex drive."²⁹ Beauty here is functional for *nature* but not for the person. Otherwise, how does one explain the fact that God loves sinners even more than the righteous ones? It is not a mere accident that the suffering servant from Isaiah 53 "had no form or beauty,"³⁰ that is, he was aesthetically unacceptable. On the other hand, the resurrected Christ appeared "in another form."³¹

Can we agree, then, that sexual relations—although ecstatic—take place at the level of *nature*, but do not lead to the level of the *mode of being* (personhood)? Whatever the answer is, we see that while the "out" character of *erotic love*, which leads to "personal otherness" (in his *Person and Eros* [Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007]), a view that John Zizioulas does not entirely endorse.

²⁸"The God of Plato has no freedom, in contrast to the God of Christians who loves sinners and the 'ugly' perhaps even more than those who are 'beautiful and good.'" J. Zizioulas, "'Created' and 'Uncreated,'" in *Communion and Otherness*, 252.

²⁹Yannaras, *Relational Ontology*, 24.

³⁰Is 53.2.

³¹Mk 16.12.

female “seduces” the man to this “natural” mode of being, the male reduces her to the role of natural child-bearer: in both cases, they are concerned with their own *self*,³² and for that reason the satisfaction of the drives does not exhaust the *desire*. This is the principal twofold weakness of gender—it aims at and rests in nature, and it cultivates the self at the expense of the Other. On the contrary, Zizioulas asserts, patristic thought proposes “a relational otherness which is always generated or caused by the Other and which aims at and ‘rests’ in the Other.”³³

Again, the relationship between genders, based on nature, is incapable of producing such a true and, ultimately, particular relationship. Here we must ardently refute the idea that the “natural” way of existence is the authentic form of being,³⁴ because, as Zizioulas claims, “the only thing that *ultimately* matters in our ethos is the *existence* of the Other.”³⁵ When the natural or moral qualities of the other, whether positive or negative, “good” or “bad,” sexual or racial, affect our attitude toward him or her, then we are on an erroneous path of judgmental moralism.

So, if gender is not ontologically justified in its actual condition, let’s consider whether or not there is a theology of gender in its eschatological state.

³²This is the conclusion of Denis de Rougemont in *L’Amour et l’Occident* (1939), trans. as *Love in the Western World*.

³³Zizioulas, “On Being Other,” in *Communion and Otherness*, 54.

³⁴Cf. Zizioulas’s observations in *ibid.*, 64. Zizioulas’s *oeuvre théologique* is at its most interesting when attacking such a perception.

³⁵Zizioulas, “On Being Other,” in *Communion and Otherness*, 91.