

Women's Ordination and the Eschatological Body: Towards an Orthodox Anthropology beyond Sexual Difference

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Abstract: The aim of my paper is to consider the construction of Christian Orthodox anthropology beyond sexual ideology and towards the eschatological body.

Among the arguments of Roman Catholic and Orthodox Church against the ordination of women, the sex of the incarnated God Word appears as a fundamental one and makes the female human being unsuitable to represent Christ. Although those who argue against the ordination of women acknowledge a) the fact that the aim of the incarnation of Son of God was exactly the restoration of unity of the divided human nature and b) the fact that in Christ men and women are equal, they in fact support that sexual difference is a structural component of human nature (and not just an external element) and that men and women are different not because each human being is a unique person but on the basis of their sexed body. What lies behind this argument is a sexual ideology that assumes that human beings are distinguished into sexes naturally. In this paper, I propose that such a view comes against not only current understandings of the construction of sex and gender but also the biblical witness and the Church's tradition. My main argument is that if we see human beings in the light of the eschatological body, no person can be excluded from ordination.

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At this point, I need to say that my intention is not to develop an Orthodox anthropology. Rather, my attempt is simply to explore the possible relevance of the notion of the eschatological body for the discussion of women's ordination. I also attempt to look at philosophically critical understandings of sex and gender in order to initiate a fruitful dialogue between Orthodox theology and in particular Orthodox anthropology and critical theories.

The paper is structured as follows: First, I focus on the work of a leading post-modern secular feminist, notably Judith Butler, in order to outline how the naturalization of sexual difference has been challenged by contemporary critical theorists. Then, I present Gregory of Nyssa's eschatologically oriented theory of gender that is based on biblical witness and argue for a Christian anthropology that would go beyond the naturalization of sexual difference claiming that aspects of Patristic thought are in accordance with contemporary denaturalization of sexual difference.

I conclude with a brief discussion on the idea that if we understand human beings in the light of the eschatological body, no person can be excluded from ordination on the basis of their sexed body.

Current philosophical understandings of the construction of sex and gender: Judith Butler

Judith Butler's work serves as the starting point of any contemporary discussion on issues of gender and sexuality. She has provided an influential analysis of sex, gender, sexuality and the body. Her work combines aspects of feminist theory and philosophy, queer theory and psychoanalysis. Her contribution to gender theory involves a radical critique of identity categories in which not only gender, but also sex, sexuality and the body are conceived as cultural products. She is an anti-essentialist feminist who argues for the death of gender stability. Her work is appealing to groups of oppressed people because it subverts the repressive net of sexual stereotypes and compulsory heterosexuality, and is critical of gender essentialism. According to gender essentialism, there is a natural essence of femininity and a natural essence of masculinity. Therefore, human beings are first understood as men and women who have to fulfill socially imposed gender requirements.

In her two very influential books, *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter* (1993), she challenges the naturalization of sex, gender, the body and heterosexuality. She reveals the ways in which sex and gender are produced within a binary framework that is conditioned by heterosexuality, rather than the other way round. Thus, it is not that sex and gender produce heterosexuality, but that heterosexuality produces sex and gender in a binary form.¹ In *Gender Trouble*, she attempts to move beyond the sex/gender distinction that had become central to feminist theory during the 1970s and early 1980s. This distinction allowed feminists to avoid biological determinism and to examine the cultural production of gender. This distinction seems to understand gender as some sort of cultural overlay on a basic biological category that is taken as given². (Sex is given and gender is a cultural overlay on sex). Yet, for Butler the category of sex is itself a gendered category. For Butler, 'Gender' is not 'natural' but repetitively 'performed'. Moreover, as she puts it: 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results.'³ She writes that sex is 'no longer believable as an interior "truth" of dispositions and identity', but is rather a 'performatively enacted signification..., one that, released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meaning.'⁴ Thus, Butler's whole project is about the denaturalization of gender and the fluidity of gender, and its creation through repeated practices. But this is not to say that gender can be constituted at will.⁵ For Butler, 'to enter into the repetitive practices of this terrain of signification is not a choice, for the "I" that might enter is always already inside: there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have.'⁶

¹ Jagger 2008: 1.

² Jagger 2008: 2.

³ Butler 1990: 33.

⁴ Butler 1990: 44.

⁵ Coakley 2002: 158.

⁶ Butler 1990: 189.

Butler's analysis on the performative production of sexed identity was criticized because it appeared to neglect the materiality of the body. In *Bodies that Matter*, she attempts to respond to accusations that she neglects the materiality of the body⁷ and that she reduces physical bodylines to mere forms of verbal instantiation.⁸ She, therefore, develops her account of performativity by reworking speech act theory to focus on the ways in which bodies are materialized as sexed.⁹ In other words, for Butler language does not create bodies. Rather she thinks that there is no access to bodies that is not already a gendered access (bodies are understood through culture, culturally determined, we make sense of bodies through cultural distinctions). By adapting speech act theory, she links the materialization of the body to the performativity of gender and, in so doing, rethinks the materiality of the sex/gendered body in non-essential terms.

Moreover, she argues that identity involves multiple and co-existing identifications and that gender identifications are 'phantasmatic.'¹⁰ As such, for Butler, these identifications are not something, which is given in biology, or some sort of essential self. An important aspect of her critique of identity is that the categories through which embodied subjects come into being are never fully determining.¹¹ This allows for the possibility of resistance (and of gender fluidity). One would say that celibacy is a form of resistance. Somehow, it is the prospect of gender liberation (not just sex liberation) and of an escape from stereotype and of an elusive personal transformation beyond normal human restrictions that are appealing to the late-twentieth century mind.¹²

What is important to keep in mind is that for critical theories the category of sex is itself a gendered category

Gregory of Nyssa's eschatologically oriented theory of gender that is based on biblical witness

Butler's thematization of gender fluidity and of subversive personal agency all echo older theistically oriented traditions.¹³ The denaturalization of sex and gender is a theme shared with an older tradition of ascetical transformation.¹⁴ Interestingly, western feminist theologians like Sarah Coakley and Tina Beattie, as well Orthodox theologians,¹⁵ argue for the relevance of the Eastern Orthodox tradition to contemporary issues of gender and sexuality. It seems that many feminist theologians revisit the eastern tradition, particularly the works of Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, in order to find liberating resources. What these feminist theologians try to do is to explore the different ways in which tradition might be interpreted in response to contemporary questions about sex and gender and sexuality.¹⁶

Tina Beattie points out that there are significant differences between eastern and western Christianity on the topic of gender and sexuality.¹⁷ Orthodox Christianity is

⁷ Jagger 2008: 4.

⁸ Coakley 2002: 160.

⁹ Jagger 2008: 4.

¹⁰ Jagger 2008: 5.

¹¹ Jagger 2008: 7.

¹² Coakley 2002: 161.

¹³ Coakley 2002: 157.

¹⁴ Coakley 2002: 159.

¹⁵ Karras 2002; Harrison 1990 and 1996; Agoras, 2004.

¹⁶ Beattie 2006: 117.

¹⁷ Beattie 2006: 117.

influenced by the encratite theology of early Christian thinkers, such as Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, in which the virginal body most perfectly symbolizes the redeemed asexual human being. In this way, Orthodox Christianity puts forward the idea that sexuality does not have ontological significance. On the other hand, Western Catholic Christianity adopts an Augustinian perspective, according to which sexual difference is to some extent ontological. Western Christianity follows Augustine's understanding of a single creative act in which the will of God finds material expression in creation so that the sexual human body is part of the original and ultimate intention of God.¹⁸ So, for Augustine, in the resurrection there shall be redeemed sexual bodies.

Orthodox Christianity has followed a different route in its doctrine of creation. Gregory of Nyssa reads the creation stories in Gen 1 and Gen 2 in terms of a double creation.¹⁹ As Andrew Louth explains: 'This doctrine of double creation makes a distinction within creation between the first creation of spiritual beings in the image of God, and the creation of human beings, embodied and marked by sexual differentiation.'²⁰ In other words, the first account of the human made in the image of God refers to a creation in which the human is a form of pre-sexual, angelic being. Sexual embodiment is a feature of a secondary, material creation in which God's foreknowledge of the fall makes sexuality contingent upon the coming of death into creation and does not refer to the image of God in the human.²¹ Therefore, at the resurrection we shall be restored to our original, pre-sexual condition in the image of God. 'To discover one's ending in one's beginning with Gregory is to go before and beyond sexual difference, to a creation and an eschaton in which humankind is sexless.'²²

Gregory's eschatologically oriented gender theory is not captive to a sexual ideology, which allows him more linguistic freedom in terms of analogy and symbolism. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* he represents the relationship between the soul and God, and between Christ and the Church through nuptial imagery. But Gregory's 'bride' is not woman, nor is she 'feminine.' Beattie points out: 'For Gregory, sexual difference has no ontological significance, and therefore his use of nuptial symbolism needs to be interpreted as a form of mystical language that transcends the body's sexual particularity.'²³ Gregory's gendered analogies do not constantly come into conflict with his sexual ontologies. 'The gendering of Gregory's theology does not become a form of ontotheology in which sexual relationships are projected into the being of God.'²⁴ Gregory's understanding of the soul as bride needs to be understood in the context of 'a profound apophatic sensibility about the divine essence'²⁵ by way of which the nuptial union goes beyond any difference that can be named or conceptualized.²⁶

For Eastern Christianity, it is God (creator), rather than creation, that becomes normative for humanity. So Orthodox Christianity does not understand the male (created) human being as the normative human.²⁷ Human beings are created in the

¹⁸ Beattie 2006:118; Louth 1997.

¹⁹ Beattie 2006:118; Louth 1997:115.

²⁰ Louth, 1997: 115.

²¹ Beattie 2006: 118; Burrus 2007.

²² Beattie 2006: 118.

²³ Beattie 2006: 117.

²⁴ Beattie 2006: 117.

²⁵ Coakley 2002: 124.

²⁶ Beattie 2006: 118.

²⁷ Karras 2004: 252.

image of God but human differentiation as male and female is not in itself a reflection of who and what God is intrinsically. In fact humanity is called to transcend, through the grace of God, the various divisions which exist within creation. Maximus delineates divisions, which include the division between the created and the uncreated and that between the perceptible and spiritual worlds, or even the distinction between male and female within humanity. The transcendence of distinctions through human mediation does not mean the obliteration of differences; 'rather it is the interrelational unifying of things which are by nature different.'²⁸ Except for the division of male and female in humanity, we are called to transcend the various levels of division, not by obliterating one for the other, but by uniting them all in ourselves as part of who we are existentially.²⁹ The division, however, between the created and uncreated must be overcome by someone who personally incorporates both created and uncreated natures, namely Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate mediator, the only one capable of reconciling this division. Thus, the incarnation is not contingent on humanity's fall. 'It is part of God's eternal plan as the culmination of humanity's mediatorial role in creation.'³⁰

To sum up: Orthodox writers, like Gregory of Nyssa and especially Maximus the Confessor, seem to understand sexual differentiation as a human characteristic outside the image of God, as irrelevant to our function as mediator and not a necessary component of eschatological human nature. Besides, if 'there were any ontological significance to sexual differentiation, then it necessarily would limit how we act and exist, and in so doing would interfere with our freedom to act ultimately and fundamentally as human beings.'³¹

The eschatological body: Constructing Orthodox anthropology beyond biological essentialism

Before I conclude, I would like to stress the importance of Butler's thought for theology. The idea that both gender and the biological category of sex are culturally determined is very instructive theologically. It is theologically precarious to accept as God-given something that seems to be historically and culturally determined. I think that what Butler challenges is biological essentialism; so does the Eastern Christian thought when it argues that our current biological body (male, female or otherwise) is meant to be transformed into another mode of existence.

Thus, in terms of an eschatological oriented theory of gender, 'there is no sexual difference', as Graham Ward puts it in the title of one of his articles. There is however ontological significance to the body. But which body is significant for theology? Is it the disembodied body or the essentially sexual body? Neither. It is in fact the 'sacramental body, which discovers its meaning through its incorporation into the performative narration of the Christian story in liturgy, worship, prayer and everyday life.'³² Attempting to construct a metaphysics of the body in a Christian context, Ward says: 'The transcendent body of Christ redefines the human body from a more exalted, in fact glorified position- so that the properties of co-abiding in Christ's body are communicated to the human body.... Baptism "by (*en*) the one Spirit' marks an ontological shift from being in the world to being *en Christo*....the use of *en* suggests

²⁸ Karras 2004: 253.

²⁹ Karras 2004: 254; Louth 1996: 69-74.

³⁰ Karras 2004: 254.

³¹ Karras 2004: 254.

³² Beattie 2006: 46.

rather another level of ontological intensity available in this world but not concurrent with it. There is an incorporation effected by baptism and this incorporate does not leave the human body as such unchanged....class notions of embodiment, ethnic notions, sexual notions ...incorporated en pneumatic and en Christo a new social order is announced. The Christocentric body politic constitutes this order...The human body participating in the risen, eschatological body politic of Christ lives in a transposition state...It lives physically in this world and equally as physical in the world to come...in the incorporation into Christ's body otherness and difference remain...the difference and materiality of *somati* are guaranteed by the one transcendent *soma*.³³

I think that a Christocentric or rather an eschato-Christocentric understanding of the body can contribute to the debates on women's ordination by introducing the following perspectives to the discussion:

1. The eschatologically oriented gender theory of Eastern Christianity subverts both gender essentialism and the culturally repressive web of sexual stereotypes.

2. *En Christo*, the act of resistance to stereotypes and compulsory sexualities, the goal of liberation and personal authenticity are not doomed to failure. *En Christo* the cultural and historical conditions of sexual oppression are not challenged; rather they are abolished.³⁴

3. In terms of an eschatologically oriented gender theory, the denaturalization of sexual difference is invested with ontological validity. In other words, within a Christocentric (and sacramental) epistemological framework, the ontological claim 'there is no sexual difference' is valid. But if *en Christo* there is no sexual difference³⁵ then nobody can be excluded from ordination on the basis of their sex.

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³³ Ward 2009: 175-179.

³⁴ However a more cynical reading of Butler's works would suggest that her theory of resistance is merely reinstating the conditions of sexual oppression against which she argues. Coakley 2002:159; c.f. Jagger 2008: 35-49.

³⁵ C.f. Yocarinis 2011.

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