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NEITHER IDOLATRY NOR ICONOCLASM: A CRITICAL ESSENTIALISM FOR CATHOLIC FEMINIST THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Following the work of gender theorists who find the terms "male" and "female" to be socially constructed, feminist theology has tended to repudiate essentialism. The position that results is one of agnosticism about biological sexuality, a position that is only reinforced by the essentialist excesses that ground the discussion of the "psycho-physical structure" of women found in official Catholic teaching. This article suggests that the polarity of feminist theology and official Catholic teaching on questions of sex and gender can be overcome by using the framework of a "critical essentialism," a position that retrieves the Catholic theological tradition of reflection on "male" and "female" while allowing its claims to be appropriately winnowed by the insights of gender theorists.

Feminist theology has grown increasingly skeptical of the usefulness of the words "male" and "female" as it grows increasingly sophisticated in its accounts of the cultural construction of gender.¹ This skepticism is reflected in the position of many feminist theologians with regard to biological sexuality, a position which can best be described as "agnostic": since biological sexuality is never available to human knowing without the cultural construction of gender, no claims at all shall be made about "maleness" or "femaleness." And indeed, both of the feminist theologians discussed in this article, while making use of female imagery for the divine (Roman Catholic Elizabeth Johnson) and engaging deeply the diverse experience of female persons (Reformed theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson), explicitly reject essentialist claims about "male" and "female," finding these to be of no more theological import than other particularities of human existence. Behind the scholarly face of this argument for agnosticism, however, rests a strategy of resistance to the conclusions of those

¹A very preliminary draft of this article was originally given as a paper to the Roman Catholic Studies Group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in November 1995, under the title "Feminism, Christology and Catholic Identity."

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wielding essentialist theories, conclusions which merely repeat foregone and sexist biases. Any essentialist position, this feminist consensus warns, will inevitably be used to bolster the position of those who continue to oppress women.

I would like to resist that solution, however, and risk engaging in a discussion that brings the important insights of gender theory into a deeper and more mutually critical conversation with the profound resonance of biological sexuality in the Catholic theological tradition. To do this, I propose the position of a "critical essentialism," a position that will bring the contributions of gender theory (drawing upon Eileen Graham's summary) to bear upon a genuine retrieval of this complex tradition (represented here by Lawrence Porter's analysis of *Mulieris dignitatem*). My contention is that the venerable tradition of reflection on biological sexuality can continue in the Catholic tradition and, indeed, that elements of this retrieval are already under way as the agnosticism I charge above is more a professed than functional position in contemporary feminist theology.

1. Anthropological Agnosticism: Sex and Gender in Feminist Theology

Contemporary Roman Catholic teaching about the creation of humanity in the image of God usually emphasizes the sexual differentiation found in that creating.² While these contemporary accounts focus on Genesis 1:27 as an account of a fundamental equality³ and generally sidestep the more problematic creation account in Genesis 2:21-24,⁴ they still draw rather specific conclusions about the meaning of that sexual differentiation, particularly in the assignment of motherhood to the meaning of being female and in priestly ordination as a possibility specific to being male. Typical of the rejection of such essentialism by Catholic feminists is the work of Elizabeth Johnson, author of the award-winning *She Who Is*.⁵ With other feminist theologians, Johnson

²For example, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 369-73.

³For a short history of the interpretation of Gen 1:27, one that takes to task the notion that this is a statement of a fundamental equality between men and women, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics" in Kari Elisabeth Børresen, ed., *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 267-91.

⁴For example, in *Mulieris dignitatem* 6, John Paul II opens his discussion of "The Image and Likeness of God" with Gen 1:27, praising it as "a concise passage [which] contains . . . fundamental anthropological truths." In contrast, his discussion of Gen 2:18-25 begins more equivocally: "In a sense the language is less precise, and, one might say, more descriptive and metaphorical, closer to the language of the myths known at the time" (the English translation of *Mulieris dignitatem* used herein is from *Origins* 18 [1988]: 262-83).

⁵Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

highlights the *relationship between* men and women as the primary anthropological focus, a structural approach that fits well with the identification of feminist theology as a form of liberation theology. She describes “women’s flourishing” as her *a priori*, a notion which, for Johnson, has a very specific meaning: “the quest for a more just and peaceful order among human beings,” a mission that she finds inextricable from a more profound awareness of the mystery of God.⁶ Those things, in other words, that impede a “just and peaceful order among human beings,” are wrong precisely because they obscure the *imago dei*. Johnson thus will place the locus of theological insight not in the creation of humanity as male and female, but in their relational ordering.

The key to the production of such a just social order for Johnson is neither “reverse sexism” nor “a sameness, which would level out genuine variety and particularity, disrespecting uniqueness.”⁷ Rather, the goal is a social order which would value the uniqueness of all beings, each in its own particularity—for humans, each in his or her own unique mix of determinations, such as sex, race, and social location. Johnson suggests that such an order would reject both a false male-female binary and a unisex model in favor of a model of “one human nature celebrated in an interdependence of multiple differences,”⁸ of which sex is only one. She rejects the straitjacket of a primordial male-female binary system, and observes that “[i]t is shortsighted to single out sexuality as always and everywhere more fundamental to concrete historical existence than any of the other constants.”⁹ Her option is for a “multipolar anthropology” which focuses on difference as a rich resource for human life, so as to allow “connection in difference rather than constantly guaranteeing identity through opposition or uniformity.”¹⁰

Such an anthropology, Johnson argues, would counteract the erroneous implication that Christ is more adequately represented by male persons because Jesus of Nazareth was a human male. Anthropologically, there is no reason for the hypostatic union to

allow the sex of the human being Jesus to be transferred to God’s own being. Interestingly enough, this has not happened with other historical particularities of the human Jesus, such as his ethnic heritage, his nationality, his age, his socioeconomic status, and so on.¹¹

⁶*Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁷*Ibid.*, 32.

⁸*Ibid.*, 155.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 156. See also Elizabeth Johnson, “The Maleness of Christ” in Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *The Special Nature of Women?* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 108-16.

¹¹Johnson, *She Who Is*, 35.

Christologically, the result of this leakage between human and divine has resulted in the familiar male images of Christ as Son and King, and the masculine images of Messiah and Logos. Johnson counters this problematic “leakage” with a christology in which a female image for divinity—Sophia, divine wisdom—becomes incarnate in a human male, Jesus of Nazareth. Her use of this image, in an economy of Sophia as Spirit—Jesus—Mother, represents a fully theological retrieval of a venerable image for God, and a constructive proposal for systematic theology.

The strength of Johnson’s proposal is in its manifold exploration of a female image for divinity as a powerful counter to a traditional and almost idolatrous insistence upon male images for Christ. But she also makes one additional claim about the use of this female imagery for the divine that I believe undermines her argument, that is, that the use of such imagery also serves as a foil for Jesus’ human maleness. Since she has clearly and correctly rejected the hypostatic “leakage” of Jesus’ biological sexuality to Christ, to now press the case that the phrase “Jesus-Sophia” balances Jesus’ *human* maleness with a female divine image seems problematic. “Jesus-Sophia,” according to Johnson, explicitly rejects the assumption of a shared maleness between Jesus and God. But while the Sophia model is an important corrective to the overuse and reification of male images for Christ, Johnson muddies her argument unnecessarily when she invokes Sophia as a kind of corrective complement for Jesus’ human maleness, a characteristic she has already dismissed as irrelevant to the argument.¹² While practically the Jesus-Sophia mix of images does function to undermine the static gender stratification of Christian symbolism (and even, Johnson notes, provides the gender turnabout of a transcendent female image with a bodily male image¹³), the problem was never Jesus *qua* human male. The problem was the insistence that this particularity also belonged to the divinity of Jesus Christ. Johnson is certainly right that female imagery for the divine is necessary and appropriate, particularly to “balance” the preponderance of male images in christology, and “Jesus-Sophia” does this well. But her further assertion that “[t]he creative, redeeming paradox of Jesus-Sophia points the way to a reconciliation of opposites and their transformation from enemies into a lib-

¹²“... [A]s Sophia incarnate Jesus, even in his human maleness, can be thought to be revelatory of the graciousness of God imaged as female. Likewise, divine Sophia incarnate in Jesus addresses all persons in her call to be friends of God, and can be truly represented by any human being called in her Spirit, women as well as men” (*ibid.*, 165).

¹³“Not incidentally, the typical stereotypes of masculine and feminine are subverted as female Sophia represents creative transcendence, primordial passion for justice, and knowledge of the truth while Jesus incarnates these divine characteristics in an immanent way relative to bodiliness and the earth” (*ibid.*).

erating, unified diversity,"¹⁴ loses sight of the problem Sophia imagery has been invoked to address. Jesus-Sophia is divinity incarnate in a male human, with the power of that divinity imaged as female—there is no question here of a female divine and male human consorting as equals. Having argued that Jesus' human maleness is precisely *not* the point, Johnson's claim about the value of Sophia imagery vis-à-vis Jesus fails to recognize that this is an "apples and oranges" interplay of a female image for the divine and a male human. Ironically, such a paradoxical "liberating, unified diversity" is bought, in this case, at the cost of theologically overvalorizing Jesus' human maleness.

For Johnson, patriarchy obscures the *imago dei* because its system of dominance and subordination is an ungodly social order, not because it obscures the image of God revealed in the creation of humanity as male and female. Yet the major contribution of her constructive project is the renaming of the divine via a conscious and fruitful use of female (not feminine) images: "The point for our interest is that the female deity is not the expression of the feminine dimension of the divine, but the expression of the fullness of divine power and care shown in a female image."¹⁵ But Johnson's choice of a female image does much more than simply destabilize entrenched male imagery by "repackaging" the fullness of divinity. Johnson's invocation of female imagery in the wisdom tradition acts as a theological wellspring, drawing on the creativity and energy in the Catholic tradition of finding sexual difference to be theologically significant. It is certainly true that this sexual difference has been filtered through the lens of patriarchy. But to acknowledge that patriarchy has distorted the image of God revealed in the creation of humanity as male and female does not entail the conclusion that sexual difference is irrelevant to the ongoing construction of the Christian tradition. On the contrary, it is precisely on the basis of the dignity and grace of female humans that Johnson builds her case for the value of a female metaphor for the divine. And, despite her understandable reservations about underlining biological sexuality, Johnson's choice of a female image for God uses well this tradition of sexual difference and underscores its importance.

Johnson's position as a Catholic feminist comes into relief when considered beside the feminist theology of Protestant Mary McClintock Fulkerson.¹⁶ McClintock Fulkerson, like Johnson, begins with an assertion of agnosticism with regard to biological sexuality, finding sexual difference to be one among many human differences (such as race or economic status). But, while both also recognize the difficulty

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁶Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject: Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

in appealing to “women’s experience,” McClintock Fulkerson argues further than any such appeal continues the fiction of a fundamentally essentialized “woman,” a fiction found in both liberal and radical or cultural feminism. Her proposal is to “change the subject” of feminist theology from the experiencing subject to the discursively constructed subject, drawing on poststructuralism’s observation that reality is not just coded, it is replete with systems of power.¹⁷ The false universal conjured up by the term “woman” fails because it implies that all women have the same needs; it invokes “representational notions of language that would direct our attention to the thing outside the sign” forsaking the meaning system of the concrete; and finally, it “reinforces the binary man-woman.”¹⁸

McClintock Fulkerson thus employs a poststructuralist theory of language in a “feminist analytic of women’s discourses” that will “de-center” the assumed universal subject.¹⁹ Her argument is that feminist liberation theology’s appeal to women’s experience moves away from a false essential, “woman,” to another false essential, “women’s experience,” making that experience the false “foundation” for the analysis of the situation (of oppression) and the equally false “foundation” on which to build a more just social order. But no such noncontextualized foundation exists, she argues, and thus any liberationist account must realize its own situatedness in a discursive totality. McClintock Fulkerson demonstrates this vividly by her careful listening to middle-class Presbyterian women and economically marginalized Pentecostal women. For McClintock Fulkerson, “[t]hese women signify a challenge to a feminist theological method dependent on women’s experience as a stable term.”²⁰

On the basis of the litmus test of my own feminist theological lexicon about empowerment of women, for example, the submissive-dependence and self-denigrating language of Pentecostal women looks to be a discourse of utter misogyny. Read intertextually and as socially graf(ph)ted on their situation, however, their practice appears different. For Pentecostal women the pleasures of their canon’s reading of the Holy Spirit and the ecstasies afforded in their intimacy with God produce a place of well-being, in stark contrast with the marks of marginalization in their lives. It is not a place immediately compatible with liberationist practices, which are di-

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 62, 117. McClintock Fulkerson argues (388) that academic work is dominated by the *Wissenschaft* of the professional managerial class, which seeks the proper formation of a discipline, control over its questions, and clear movement toward solutions, in a word, “closure.” She writes, “[t]he civility of our ideal—making intellectual wholes—should make us nervous.”

²⁰*Ibid.*, 355.

rected toward resisting socio-economic marginalization, but it is a place of God-sustained integrity.²¹

Recognizing difference, McClintock Fulkerson's reading of academic feminist theology thus sees her own practice of feminist theology (her own appropriation of the certifying discourse and "pleasures" of academia) as also a situated and thus contextual account.²²

McClintock Fulkerson's goal is a feminist theology of difference that envisions emancipation in terms of the poststructuralist task of mediating difference rather than in terms of the pluralism of liberal modernity, which finally constructs the other in her own image. She rather calls for an "*iconoclasm* that refuses to say what a 'real' woman is, even as it testifies to the possibilities of liberation."²³ The fruit of this iconoclasm would be a feminist theology of "affinity" rather than solidarity or shared identity. This "affinity," McClintock Fulkerson emphasizes, is necessary for a truly liberative practice, as it remains non-coercive in its approach to the difference between women. McClintock Fulkerson's exercise of this approach is evident both in her attentive analysis of the discourse of Presbyterian women, and in her evocative description of her theological perspective on gender as "passionate agape."²⁴

Johnson and McClintock Fulkerson both wrestle with the damage androcentrism has done to Christianity. Johnson's claim is that theology has allowed metaphors to become idols, forgetting the fundamental incomprehensibility of God. As God is neither male nor female, Johnson argues, neither masculine nor feminine metaphors are more appropriate and, given the power of these metaphors, female images should now serve as a corrective to the centuries-old predominance of male images and their deification of "masculine" attributes. McClintock Fulkerson would largely agree with Johnson's diagnosis, but her iconoclastic solution calls for an at-least short-term "silence" on the subject, as all speech inevitably spills into the errors of predetermined cultural patterns. Yet Johnson lavishly exploits female images for God, and McClintock Fulkerson's focus on a specific group of woman clearly gives great value, even loving witness, to human females. Why then, this reticence about biological sexuality? Rather than this stance of agnosticism, I suggest that a direct and critical engagement with the venerable tradition of theological reflection on biological sexuality is the appropriate responses for Catholic theologians.

²¹*Ibid.*, 357.

²²*Ibid.*, 335.

²³*Ibid.*, 386 (emphasis added). McClintock Fulkerson also calls for a "theo/acentric iconoclasm," extending her agnosticism about humanity to its discourse about God.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 384.

II. *The Perspective of a "Critical Essentialism"*

The starting point for Catholic feminist reflection on the sex/gender issue should be the perspective of what I will term a "critical essentialism." By the word "essentialism" I mean to indicate that the creation of humanity as "male" and "female" should continue to stand as a fixed point of reference for theological reflection. By the word "critical" I mean to indicate that we have no unconstructed access to this fixed point, and that therefore all theological interpretation of humanity as "male" and "female" is provisional—no final, positive theological interpretation of biological sexuality can be asserted. Yet this provisional interpretation is not without grounding: as a reflection on a determinate theological tradition its legitimacy is derived from its responsiveness to that tradition in all its complexity and contextuality. The strength of this approach lies not in its novelty, but in its ability to bring the strength of the Catholic intellectual tradition to bear on the aberration of patriarchal understandings of sex and gender in a profound act of self-reflection. In other words, I offer this phrase as an attempt to name an approach to sex/gender questions that is characteristic of Catholic theology (well exemplified by Elizabeth Johnson's use of female imagery for the divine), indeed, an approach that I believe is already more operative than not, however unrecognized.

This proposal for a "critical *essentialism*" reflects the Catholic tradition in its assertion that biological sexuality is not merely anthropologically, but theologically, significant.²⁵ It reflects, in other words, that insofar as humanity mediates the divine, it does so with a variety of concrete particularities, among which "male and female" hold a certain traditional prominence. The position of a critical essentialism becomes clear when it is considered not as a novel *tertium quid*, but rather as a term which introduces a conversation between gender theorists and magisterial Catholic theology. From gender theory comes the position that not only have we no access to uninterpreted biological sexuality, the division of humanity into male-and-female is itself a patriarchal social construction with only incidental biological moorings. This position has been very influential for feminist theology, as the rejection of essentialism is almost universally characteristic of feminist theologians.²⁶ In contrast is the fundamentalist essentialism of con-

²⁵There are some similarities between the goals of this terminology and that of those who propose a "critical realism" (see the discussion as this characterizes critical moderns in *ibid.*, 309-15, and, in a postmodern sensibility, Albert Borgmann's "focal realism" in his *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992], 116-22). At this time I see more possibility for dialogue with the Catholic tradition via an engagement with the framework of ontology rather than the analytical stance of critical realism, thus my option for the language of "essentialism."

²⁶In a major review essay, "'Women's Experience' Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Feminist, Womanist and *Mujerista* Theologies in North America," *Religious Stud-*

servative Catholic theologians and much official Catholic teaching, which argues that the gender constructs “masculine” and “feminine” are well grounded in, and representative of, biological sexual duality, a duality best understood by an anthropology of complementarity. The position of critical essentialism that I propose attempts to bring these two positions into a constructive dialogue about sex and gender within the broad stream of the Catholic tradition.

A study in gender and theology by Eileen Graham represents the first voice in this dialogue.²⁷ Graham notes recent studies in psychology and biology that find that scientific accounts of the differences between males and females have often been guilty of “emphasizing statistical bipolarity between males and females and ignoring significant similarities and overlaps.”²⁸ Socially constructed stories of masculinity and femininity have often driven scientific examination of male and female “nature,” overemphasizing and even creating gender differences. Graham insists that all our understanding about gender is constructed, and, at the same time, that there is no non-gendered perspective, no “neutral” perspective from which we may postulate an essential basis for “male” and “female.” All studies of the demonstrable physical differences between males and females “are always already intertwined with cultural elaborations,” Graham writes, and thus she dismisses those physical differences that are concerned with “reproduction, nourishment, survival” as “certain biological imperatives” that “may persist.”²⁹ In short, gender differences are not reflections on any given biological distinctions but are completely constructed, indeed “generated,” by social forces.³⁰

ies Review 21 (1995): 171, Serene Jones opens her discussion of “women’s experience” as this is treated in nine recent studies (Elizabeth A. Johnson, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Rita Nakashima Brock, Catherine Keller, Delores Williams, Sallie McFague, Kathryn Tanner, Ada Marfa Isasi-Díaz, and Rebecca S. Chopp) by observing that all these theologians have in common an “affirmation of the non-essential nature of women.”

²⁷Eileen L. Graham, “Gender, Personhood and Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48 (1995): 341-58.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 345. Graham gives a detailed analysis of gender bias in anthropology, biology, and psychoanalysis in her *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 59-119.

²⁹Graham, “Gender, Personhood and Theology,” 354.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 356. Barbara Ehrenreich and Janet McIntosh caution, however, that post-modern critiques of gender, class, and racial biases in the sciences has resulted in a pervasive and troubling antibiologism in academic circles (“The New Creationism: Biology under Attack,” *The Nation* 264 [June 9, 1997], 11-16). For example, assertions based on studies of DNA are met not with critiques of the cultural values presupposed by the studies conducted, but with disbelief about the existence of DNA itself. Ehrenreich and McIntosh call this perspective a secular creationism as it sunders reflective, culture-creating human beings from their biological existence by claiming, not unlike religious creationism, “that humans occupy a status utterly different from and clearly ‘above’ that of all other living beings” (12). Such a perspective of constructive multiplicity without any universal basis, Ehrenreich and McIntosh continue, denies the possibility of any grounds for common human action or communication.

Moreover, according to Graham, the construction and maintenance of essentialist grounds for gender differences have functioned to mask and legitimate the social forces that “create” these differences: “If women’s difference from men rest[s] not in social relations and human practice but in some prediscursive, pre-Oedipal sphere, the source and nature of gender is effectively placed beyond critical scrutiny.”³¹ With this assertion, Graham accurately places her finger on the fears that essentialist arguments raise for feminist theologians: the assertion of indisputable and sexist imperatives. But a distinction can be drawn between “source” and “nature.” The “source of gender,” the grounds on which societies and religious traditions have built stories of “masculinity” and “femininity,” is biological sexual difference, a difference that seems rather likely to “persist,” if indeed women and men are to continue such incidental functions as “reproduction, nurturing, survival.” *That we are created male and female, and that this difference plays a large part in the central human tasks of “reproduction, nurturing, survival” is indeed “beyond critical scrutiny.”* But *what* that fixed point of reference signifies, is by no means beyond analysis. To observe, therefore, that the source of gender is a given—biological sexuality—is not to make any positive or unrevisable claims about what biological sexuality signifies. What Graham rightly protests, of course, is the idea that the nature of biological sexuality can be clearly and objectively put forward. She protests, in other words, that particular claims are being made about what creation as male and female mean, and that these constructions about “masculinity” and “femininity” are being put forward as the will or intention of the Creator. On the contrary, gender theorists in a wide variety of disciplines are demonstrating, over and over again, that assumptions about what is “natural” to being male and being female are the products of a human culture that is relentlessly dualistic in its construction.

Graham further argues that while gender theorists reject essentialism, this does not mean that they discount bodiliness. Rather, they see “bodies as the primary source and medium of our *relationship* to the world—as a kind of ‘vantage-point’ for experience, whilst lending diversity and provisionality to such accounts.”³² Each body represents a constellation of determinations which together constitute a given lens on the world. Johnson’s “multipolar anthropology,” in which embodiedness represents a palette of perspectives that shape human identity, is similar to Graham’s understanding. But, while both writers valorize

³¹Graham, “Gender, Personhood and Theology,” 353. Graham makes a brief reference to trinitarian theology to support the notion that gendered social relations might find some metaphysical ground in the mutual self-gift of the trinitarian life. But this works in her study only as generalized relations of difference, not gendered relations.

³²*Ibid.*, 356 (emphasis added).

embodiedness and are aware of its concrete situatedness, they only affirm a generic concept of “embodiedness” and in so doing sidestep the profound experience of being embodied as a male or as a female. While men and women share and suffer much in common—tossing feverishly through a long night of sickness, savoring the soft rain of midsummer, leaning on one another in old age—we live our lives not “embodied” generically, but as male and female. And while the Catholic tradition contains a variety of anthropological reflections about the significance of bodiliness for humanity, it is the aspect of being created male and female that bears the burden and distinction of being viewed as a profound locus for theological reflection. Nonetheless, while I find theologically untenable the position that treats bodily biological sexuality as only one among many human perspectives, gender theorists’ critical assessment of the social systems imbedded in essentialist assertions, and their call for a self-conscious “diversity and provisionality” with regard to any such claims, present a much-needed perspectival corrective for Catholic theology.

In contrast to Graham is a study by Lawrence Porter representing the second voice in this dialogue, the position of magisterial Catholic theology.³³ Porter’s article takes as its foundation John Paul II’s 1988 teaching on women, *Mulieris dignitatem*. Porter details the philosophical framework behind the text, particularly as the pope’s phenomenological method entails a focus not on

humanity in the abstract, but rather always as consciously experienced. And that means that when considering the human species he always considers humanity as either male or female, such sexual differentiation being not a distinction which enters after the fact of existence, but instead significantly conditions human existence from the beginning.³⁴

This perspective grounds the primary claim of *Mulieris dignitatem*, that is, that the capacity for childbearing profoundly and fundamentally stamps the existence and experience of being female. The pope will thus refer to the “psycho-physical structure of women” as deeply marked by the vocation of motherhood, of both the physical and spiri-

³³Lawrence B. Porter, “Gender in Theology: The Example of John Paul II’s *Mulieris Dignitatem*,” *Gregorianum* 77 (1996): 97-131. Porter’s article, it must be emphasized, is a careful and systematic account of John Paul II’s treatment of gender in the context of his theology. Particularly helpful is Porter’s unflinching delineation of the implications of this approach. My argument against the positions Porter puts forward is that he is happy to draw favorable parallels between John Paul’s thought and the work of radical/romantic feminism, but that he never uses the latter as a critical tool for the examination of the implications he details.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 103.

tual variety. Noting that more than physical motherhood is at issue, Porter argues that the pope's position represents a much more comprehensive claim than the "biology is destiny" argument. Indeed, Porter, with a sensibility in keeping with the pope's discussion of women's "special sensitivity" in *Mulieris dignitatem*, describes the "psycho-physical structure of women," as "an innate capacity for community, for making room for another."³⁵ But such an extension of the concept does nothing to address the problems Porter implicitly acknowledges as inherent in the original "biology is destiny" position. On the contrary, to add a psychological structure to the generative "destiny" of being female is not to circumscribe a biological "imperative," but to make it even more all encompassing. In this post-Freudian elaboration of the generativity argument, women are not only "destined" to become "mothers," their caregiving is now without limit.

Porter's discussion of this "psycho-physical structure" reflects another very strong claim about women in *Mulieris dignitatem*. In the pope's teaching, the "psycho-physical structure" of women is deemed specific not only to female humanity, but to all humanity. In this relational capacity, according to John Paul II, "the 'woman' is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race: she represents the humanity which belongs to all human beings, both men and women."³⁶ But how can women be more exemplary of humanity, if humanity only exists as male and female, as John Paul's phenomenological method asserts? How can one claim that one "psycho-physical structure" is more characteristic of the generic form than the other "psycho-physical structure," if no such generic exists?

Moreover, neither John Paul nor Porter present *any* positive description of a *male* "psycho-physical structure," except to assert that a hypothetical male distance from generativity yields a psyche deficient in the "capacity for community," which in this argument means a deficient humanity.³⁷ Men, in other words, do not "naturally" care for others. Porter moves from this dubious claim about male relational poverty to an astonishing assertion. Those men who overcome this relational deficiency and come forward to lead the community as ordained

³⁵*Ibid.*, 112.

³⁶*Mulieris dignitatem* 4, cited in Porter, "Gender in Theology," 113.

³⁷Sulpician priest Gerald Brown, president of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, observed this lacuna during the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women. "From the perspective of men," he noted in a formal statement in response to John Paul II's "Letter of the Holy Father to Women," a letter which is something of a summary of *Mulieris dignitatem*, "at least one would hope that maleness would be more than the remainder of what is left over after all the dimensions of emininity have been articulated. Some of that remainder in contemporary discourse is singularly unflattering" (*Origins* 25 [1995]: 144).

ministers, Porter speculates, are better suited as leaders of the community *precisely because they do so despite being essentially flawed*:

when a male's religious vocational response is marked out with ordination what results is a more dramatic witness to or signal of transcendence, for the generativity that is a woman's simply in virtue of her physical makeup can be a man's only by virtue of his making an appropriate moral decision.³⁸

This assertion (which Porter admits is "bold") points to a number of highly problematic assumptions.³⁹ With regard to women, this implies that the innate psychological hold of generativity is so strong that the act of mothering, spiritual or otherwise, requires no courage, self-transcendence, or vision on the part of the female. Most directly, this implies that the bearing of children represents no moral decision for women. (Indeed, as this innate capacity is seen as a human ideal, one wonders if women require any moral faculty at all.) What such a "bold assertion" does support is the devastating situation of a culture awash in absentee fathers, as it undergirds the claim that any paternal responsibility requires heroic "self-transcendence" (i.e., the negation of maleness).⁴⁰

Porter claims that there is affinity between the pope's assertion of a "psycho-physical structure" characteristic of women and the tendency of feminist theorists, particularly those whose orientation is psychoanalytic, to assign specific characteristics to female persons.⁴¹ Observing that these feminist writers are hesitant to claim essentialist grounds for their descriptions of the "feminine," Porter claims that "it is arguable John Paul II's phenomenology of sexual differentiation takes sexual differentiation even more seriously than any of these feminist writers are willing to take it."⁴² But what Porter misses is that

³⁸Porter, "Gender in Theology," 114.

³⁹For example, this assertion seems to suggest that baptism is not enough to overcome the deficiency of maleness; we will now have to ordain men in order to save them! Porter later adds "thus argument for women's ordination which cites women's native or natural capacity for this role—that a woman can be as much maybe even more prepared for ordination psychologically and educationally as any man—is beside the point" (*ibid.*, 124). Porter argues that the Eucharist is an eschatological sign, and the "male's lack of innate capacity for this" allows for the sign to be "sacramentally reinforced."

⁴⁰Porter does recognize the problem of absentee fathers, but sees the notion that fatherhood is foreign to "being male" as a statement of fact, not as a problematic cultural message. In the current climate, Porter argues, "the witness of a male assuming a responsible role vis-à-vis the family or community is perhaps more significant of grace than ever before" (*ibid.*, 125). Considering the strong claims about women's psycho-physical structure he upholds, Porter's anthropological model seems to be one in which women are called to conform to nature while men are called to reject it.

⁴¹Porter cites the work of Nancy Chodorow and Wendy Hollway (*ibid.*, 121-23).

⁴²*Ibid.*, 125.

these writers are constantly aware that a patriarchal context is always already conditioning any experience of sexual differentiation, and are thus understandably rather cautious about making any positive claims about female experience, much less any essentialist claims about female "nature."⁴³ One can agree with Porter that "the human species is always found either male or female, and though equal in dignity, the difference is not only significant but significative."⁴⁴ But to reify *what* this difference signifies is to turn away from the dignity conferred on a humanity made in the image of its Creator, and toward an ahistorical golden calf.

The "critical essentialist" position is, I believe, a position that can come into constructive dialogue with current Catholic teaching, albeit with some reservations. Consider, for example, a careful summary of the Catholic position put forward by Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon, writing for the Vatican delegation to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995):

The term *gender* is understood by the Holy See as grounded in biological sexual identity, male or female. . . . The Holy See thus excludes dubious interpretations based on world views which assert that sexual identity can be adapted indefinitely to suit new and different purposes. It also dissociates itself from the biological determinist notion that all the roles and relations of the two sexes are fixed in a single static pattern.⁴⁵

Glendon's legal training comes to the fore here in direct language that both reflects and clarifies the fundamental stance found in *Mulieris dignitatem*. Left as stated, this is very close to the sensibility of the proposed "critical essentialism," that is, that male and female are to be retained as appropriate foci for theological reflection, with an understanding that such reflection may be revised (though not "indefinitely," indicating a [disputable] limit). Unfortunately, the clarification also cites the "distinctiveness and complementarity of women and men," and closes by noting, with John Paul II, that "presence of a certain diversity of roles is in no way prejudicial to women, provided that this diversity is not the result of an arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female."⁴⁶

⁴³Graham ("Gender, Personhood and Theology," 356) correctly notes that "it has been the rule that embodiment is regarded as an exclusively female quality, and that the female gender is marked with the signs of carnality, non-rationality and biological determinism."

⁴⁴Porter, "Gender in Theology," 130.

⁴⁵*Origins* 25 (1995): 236.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, quoting from John Paul II, "Letter to Women," paragraph 11. The text of the pope's letter appears in *Origins* 25 (1995): 137-43.

This language provides a link to the assertion in *Mulieris dignitatem* that “motherhood” is specific to being female, though an optimistic reading could argue that any such assertion is now secondary. What is important is that this clarification, though using the problematical language of “biological sexual *identity*,” does explicitly leave open the relationship between biological sexuality and the ongoing construction of gender, resulting in a starting point potentially retrievable by the “critical essentialism” here proposed.

The advantage of the position of critical essentialism for Catholic theology is that it retains the centrality of the doctrine of creation, with its ancient insight about the importance of humanity’s creation as male and female, while giving full import to the fact that this ancient insight is never received apart from the ongoing life of the reflecting Church. Apart from this insight, given “essentialist” grounds in Catholic theology, any other *a priori* claims made under the rubric of “critical essentialism” would have to be very carefully scrutinized, although many working observations may rightly persist. For example, contemporary reflections on the claim that humanity is created as male and female have often, *but need not*, entail a claim that this difference is “essentially” relational.⁴⁷ Male and female are to be understood as essential differences, but this difference need not imply an anthropology of complementarity in which male and female only find their meaning in the other. Neither does this difference imply a relational *a priori* about a fundamental equality between men and women.⁴⁸ There is no more fundamental “whole” humanity that is androgynous, whether signified by dominant-submissive heterosexual relations or by more recent models of mutuality and relational equality. Rather, the (never accessed) starting points for reflection are males and females—both are made in the image of God, each bears whatever fullness of that image is given to any concrete particular, and each bears whatever limitation being male or female might necessarily entail.⁴⁹ To address a similar argument, the fact that we now may identify traits usually thought of as “feminine” in males or “masculine” in females

⁴⁷See, e.g., the exposition of personhood in Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 243-305. For an example of a gendered approach which claims to reject a rigid sex polarity yet continues to pose a “marital structure of reality,” see Prudence Allen, “Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 523-44.

⁴⁸See, in this regard, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s critique of interpretation of Gal 3:28 in “Justified by All Her Children: Struggle, Memory, and Vision” in Concilium Foundation and Philip Hillyer, eds., *On the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 27-32.

⁴⁹Porter observes that John Paul II’s phenomenological approach finds that “sexual differentiation conditions the person’s freedom from the beginning and always” (“Gender in Theology,” 126). This observation is compatible with the position of critical essentialism.

does not invalidate biological difference, making for a psychological ideal of a “healthy composite” of maleness and femaleness. On the contrary, such “gender-bending” possibilities tell us that our understanding of being male and being female has been partial and overly influenced by a complementarity model. Neither does bisexuality or homosexuality negate biological sexual difference. Rather, these sexual orientations represent further information about being male and being female, *qua* male and *qua* female. To be lesbian, for example, is not to belong to a subgroup that is deviantly female; rather, being lesbian broadens the palette of what “female, made in the image of God” signifies.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the theological tradition is replete not with stories of males and stories of females, but with male-female binaries. Most Christian images of females, in particular, depict women exclusively in relationship to men, and these relationships are marked by patterns of dominance and submission that pervade the tradition in ways that have become conflated with theories about an essential female “psycho-physical structure.” Some of these social constructs and the power politics they represent are easy to recognize, as with the parallel “male is to female as Christ is to the Church.”⁵¹ Some point to more complex issues, such as the association

⁵⁰Another article would be required to discuss why critical essentialism would not, *a priori*, imply complementarity. Two points will have to suffice. First, on theological grounds, one must reject the implicit presupposition that androgyny conveys a fuller “image of God” than maleness or femaleness alone, a sort of “federalist” approach to mystery. While the tradition holds that humanity as male and as female is a fact of revelation, it makes no sense theologically to say that male-and-female-together constitute “more” revelation. Secondly, on epistemological grounds, one must reject the claim that any knowledge of “female” and “male” immediately requires a theory of complementarity, as the terms themselves are inherently relational. While it is true that, with regard to knowledge, any specificity comes into relief only in the presence of difference, the fact that all knowing is relational does not entail that complementary relationality characterizes every particular instance of knowing.

⁵¹For example, *Mulieris dignitatem* 26: “The Eucharist . . . is the Sacrament of the Bridegroom and the Bride . . . Christ is united with this ‘body’ as the bridegroom with the bride. Since Christ, in instituting the Eucharist, linked it in such an explicit way to the priestly service of the Apostles, it is legitimate to conclude that he thereby wished to express the relationship between man and woman, between what is ‘feminine’ and what is ‘masculine.’ . . . It is the Eucharist above all that expresses the redemptive act of Christ the Bridegroom towards the Church the Bride. This is clear and unambiguous when the sacramental ministry of the Eucharist, in which the priest acts ‘in persona Christi,’ is performed by a man.” A full theological exposition and discussion of this spousal metaphor is beyond the scope of this article. (Benedict Ashley summarizes the traditional discussion in “Gender and the Priesthood of Christ: A Theological Reflection,” *Thomist* 57 [1993]: 343-79.) Yet to appear, however, is a discussion of this metaphor that adequately accounts for the role of lay men in the church, other than to suggest as their model the faithfully laboring but somehow superfluous St. Joseph (for a positive reading, see the essay by Paul Baumann, “Saint Joseph: A Family Man” in Paul Elie, ed., *A Tremor of Bliss: Contemporary Writers on the Saints* [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994], 199-222).

of women with bodiliness due to childbearing. No criticism of these issues is mounted, however, by a person standing outside of the existential situation of humans as males and females, even one who is able to analyze and criticize the relentlessly binary framework of this existential situation. And the binary male-female thoroughly pervades not only culture but also the faith tradition that Christians claim to be God's life with us. A term such as "critical essentialism" must therefore be understood as it operates not as a philosophical or scientific locution, but as a theological term, that is, as a term whose function is not comprehensive explanation, but "catholic" exploration—a term that suggests avenues of faithful inquiry as it guards against error. In sum, the position of critical essentialism asserts that creation and our experience of it are appropriate arenas for theological reflection, and that while we have no unconstructed human access to the meaning of our creation as male and female, we can and should continue to plumb the mystery of biological sexuality as "holy work," standing as we do in a tradition that has consistently found maleness and femaleness to be, in Porter's words, "not only significant but significative."

III. "Critical Essentialism" and Catholic Theology

Johnson and McClintock Fulkerson each offer substantive resources for the construction of a Catholic feminist theology. Johnson's contribution is theological as she critically employs female images for God, female images that are drawn not from a generic "humanity" but from women in particular. While a number of interchangeable differences of race and social location have also been employed to image the incomprehensible God, it is the male image she finds to be used most idolatrously, and to counter it she uses not a neutered image, but a female one. McClintock Fulkerson's contribution is methodological, as her description of an "intertextual economy" brings strongly forward the kind of concrete, critical dialogical process that a responsible appropriation of the Catholic tradition on the mediation of the divine by creation might require.⁵²

For example, while McClintock Fulkerson's critical work may well continue to focus on the texts that are in the foreground of her Reformed tradition, a Catholic theologian may employ the critical stance of this "intertextual economy" in a discussion of the sacramental tradition, a tradition which remains theologically powerful for Catholics

⁵²"[T]he notion of textuality serves as a metaphor for cultural and social realities as well as written texts. When everything is textualized, so to speak, we can explain the relation of the community and social formation encompassing the reading of a text as an *intertextual* relation. An intertextual economy allows that the production of meaning is 'inter' (between) rather than 'intra' (within) or 'extra' (outside of) written texts and subject positions" (McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject*, 165).

despite the philosophical rupture of the thomistic notion of analogy by nominalism and its Enlightenment heirs. Indeed, some magisterial discussions of the “essential nature of women” seem to reflect the worst of manual theology’s neo-scholastic rigidity, as they reduce biological sexual difference to the status of a ritual fetish. The polyvalence and fluidity of an approach such as McClintock Fulkerson’s “intertextual economy” could enable a more critical meeting of gender theory and the Catholic tradition of theological reflection on biological sexuality, one that may well yield a more complex and genuinely sacramental understanding of maleness and femaleness and Christ and the church. As it stands, the clearest touchstone for the understanding of biological sexuality for Roman Catholics is the requirement of biological maleness as a prerequisite for ordination. While the most famous, the inability of John Paul II to say anything about the male psychophysical structure explains why this example is perhaps the least illustrative of the profound resonance of biological sexuality in the Roman Catholic tradition. By flatly asserting the male sex as normative, this requirement has effectively functioned to reduce the complex Catholic tradition of reflection on the theological significance of biological sexuality to a simple matching exercise.

But to be swayed by impoverished examples is to misread, in my opinion, both current possibilities and past formulations. There never was, one must recall, a “purely” essentialist account of biological sexuality. The theological tradition about humanity as male and female has always been a human meditation on the action of God—in other words, an interpretive act by creation on creation. That the ancient insight prizing biological sexuality has been appropriated for idolatrous ends, or marked by a patriarchal culture’s androcentric reading of its own experience, does not render it invalid, nor should this misuse be allowed to silence the ongoing polyphony of creation and tradition and economy. It is my opinion that a great loss will occur if Catholic feminists allow an agnostic approach to biological sexuality to marginalize their important reflections on theological anthropology, *reflections that, not incidentally, revel in the concretion of being female*. This agnostic stance sidelines, to borrow McClintock Fulkerson’s own language, the “pleasures” of theological anthropology, and, by implication, the “pleasures” of christology—the rich liturgical, mystical and sacramental tradition on the person of Jesus Christ. From Irenaeus’ apologetical accounts of redemption against gnostic Christianity to Thomas’ metaphysic of being to Rahner’s “searching” christology (and anthropology) to Tracy’s analogical imagination, the Catholic theological tradition, while not denying the place of the cross and resurrection, has located the meaning of the event of Christ and, indeed of cre-

ation itself, in the scandal of the Incarnation—the fact that God joined Godself deeply to the very particular “pleasures” of being human. To argue that Jesus’ maleness must be seen either as incidental to this tradition (the iconoclasm option), or as overdetermining of it (the heresy of idolatry), would be, I believe, to abandon the retrieval of the tradition of theological reflection on the creation of humanity as male and female—to cede, in other words, the very possibility that feminist theology so richly promises.⁵³ Without fully engaging this central affirmation, feminist theology remains in the awkward position of reducing the gospel message to a rather antiseptic functional assertion in which the divinity of Christ is revealed, for example, in Jesus’ gender-bending relationships. It also misses a concomitant anthropological opportunity to explore its own concern for the concrete and the particular as reflected in the Catholic tradition that humanity, instantiated as male and female, mediates the divine.

Moreover, the loss of this concern for the sacramentality of creation would mean the loss of the characteristically Catholic trajectory in Christianity. For example, McClintock Fulkerson acknowledges that she allows the “sign” “God” to remain unexamined in her work, by which she means that she is committed to doing theology, with the assent of faith implied therein.⁵⁴ But McClintock Fulkerson does not do “theology in general” but theology that reflects her own situation in the Reformed tradition. While feminist theologians are now careful to identify the lenses of race and class, a certain skepticism about institutions has led it, I believe, to overlook the fact that the appropriation of Christianity is never generic. McClintock Fulkerson makes important arguments for restraint with regard to theological assertions about the subject “woman” and the more complex “women’s experience,” but surely these are shaped by her own Reformed tradition’s position of “iconoclasm” with regard to creation, now appropriated in a new way for McClintock Fulkerson’s feminist insights. Such an “iconoclasm” is foreign (not “heresy”) to both the Catholic tradition of finding biological sexuality to be theologically significant and the Catholic sacramental sensibility. (The strongest witness against such an iconoclasm in

⁵³The scope of this article precludes a full treatment of this claim, though I recognize the necessity of such an exploration to show the relevance of “critical essentialism” to the feminist project. For a somewhat similar perspective, see Eleanor McLaughlin, “Christology in Dialogue with Feminist Ideology—Bodies and Boundaries” in Robert F. Berkey and Sarah A. Edwards, eds., *Christology in Dialogue* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1993), 308-39; and the discussion of theological anthropology in Mary Aquin O’Neill, “The Nature of Women and the Method of Theology,” *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 730-43 (though I reject O’Neill’s suggestion that such an anthropological perspective “would mean that Jesus alone could not accomplish the redemption of all humanity” [736]).

⁵⁴McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject*, ix.

the Catholic tradition is, of course, the cult of Mary of Nazareth as virgin and mother.) In contrast, Johnson's invocation of Sophia "becoming flesh, choosing the very stuff of the cosmos as her own personal reality"⁵⁵ retrieves this Catholic sensibility in its positive use of a female image for God, even as it is, in my opinion, unnecessarily reticent about anchoring this insight analogically in the lived tradition of Catholic anthropology.

A fully realized Catholic feminist theology would draw upon the critical insights of feminist and gender theorists as well as studies of the development of doctrine and tradition in Catholic thought, since both archives contribute, respectively, to the "horizontal" and "vertical" appropriation of the Catholic tradition on biological sexuality. The "critical essentialism" proposed above doctrinally orients this retrieval, as an acknowledgment of the tradition and of its continuing life. The realization of this article's proposed re-examination of the possibilities latent in the Catholic tradition of the revelatory power of human sexuality would witness well, I believe, to feminist theology's insistence on the concrete and particular, that is, to feminist theology's contribution to the "catholicity" of the Catholic tradition.⁵⁶

⁵⁵Johnson, *She Who Is*, 168.

⁵⁶I thank my colleagues John Thiel and Paul Lakeland, and an anonymous reader at *Horizons* for numerous helpful comments.