

## Beyond Distinct Gender Identities: The Social Construction of the Human Body

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Today it is common knowledge that there are a multitude of interdependencies between body, soul, and spirit. Nevertheless, when it comes to sexual identity it seems that the body continues to represent a solid and unshakable, objective point of reference while the soul and spirit only come into play secondarily. In any case, a healthy understanding of the human being seems to assume that there simply just are men and women and that both are mutually exclusive — *tertium non datur*. Gender difference appears to be biologically set, and even the creation narratives seem to confirm this idea from a biblical-religious perspective. Women might behave in unladylike ways, but they are still women. Men might feel effeminate, but that hardly means they can escape that masculine identity rooted in their bodies. The classification of persons into men and women seems to be distanced from all cultural interpretation and to be fixed, so to speak, “objectively” prior to all social constructs.

This paper aims to disturb these everyday assumptions and to show that, when it comes to gender identity, it is not only the body that is the basis for gender-associated cultural ascriptions, but rather that cultural norms and constraints also have an incredible impact both upon the body and upon how the body is experienced. Indeed, they can change and disfigure the body. Moreover, everything dealing with the human body can only ever be observed and described under very particular cultural conditions. Especially with respect to gender identity, it is not only religion and culture but also the apparently objective sciences of biology and medicine that are ideologically

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charged.<sup>1</sup> This exposes the mythical nature of the idea of an objective body or of the natural division of gender into a binary structure.

### 1. Gender as Habitus

When one examines gender identity, it becomes clear how closely body, mind, and soul are related to one another. Using his concept of habitus, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has illustrated how, contrary to popular opinion, it is not the body that presents the objective, causal basis for the derivation of binary conceptions of gender, but it is rather the particular cultural conceptions and typologies that crystallize in the experience of corporeality. The binary differentiation of gender, which would not be possible without our familiar forms of culture and language, is so to speak “embodied.” It is “in the embodied state — in the habitus of the agents, functioning as systems of schemes of perception, thought and action.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, with a habitus one is dealing with an unreflected process of internalization, with “embodied” habits, the incarnation of the schemes and structures of social praxis.

The asymmetry in bipolar gender relations is thus expressed first and foremost in posture and its corresponding scripts of perception. According to Bourdieu’s thesis, this habitus exists primarily in two forms: one male, one female. Each gender-differentiated habitus exists in relation to the other. Accordingly, the habitus is created in the form of two opposing yet complementary postures (hexis) together with their respective principles of vision. While “habitus” refers to a deep structure that also encompasses the schemes of perception, Bourdieu uses the term “hexis” to refer to that external and perceivable ensemble of permanently acquired postures and physical movements. This ensemble of permanently acquired postures, which arise through the unconscious imitation of particular, gender-differentiated motor movements and behaviors, is a basic dimension of one’s sense of social orientation. Consequently, the social aspect is efficiently embodied and naturalized via posture, primarily because posture and feeling correspond to one another. Thus gender

1. On the constructive character of anatomy, cf. T. Laqueur, *Auf den Leib geschrieben. Die Inszenierung der Geschlechter von der Antike bis Freud* (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 1992), pp. 188ff.

2. P. Bourdieu, *Male Domination* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 8. “The Habitus is the product as well as the producer of practices: repeated experiences condense in bodies as perceptive, cognitive and behavioural schemes and in this way remain actively present.”

norms exist “in the way in which people move, in their gestures, indeed even in the ways in which they eat.”<sup>3</sup>

The secret behind the successful production of these two genders lies in the fact that it occurs for the most part “automatically,” without conscious direction or reflection. It is anchored in the routines of the division of labor and the routines of one’s physical body. Each person (man or woman) is required (both implicitly and explicitly) constantly to emphasize those characteristics that correspond to the social definition of his or her gender identity and to carry out corresponding practices while suppressing inappropriate behaviors.<sup>4</sup> “Early upbringing tends to inculcate ways of bearing the body, or various parts of it . . . , ways of walking, holding the head or directing the gaze, directly in the eyes or at one’s feet, etc., which are charged with an ethic, a politics and a cosmology.”<sup>5</sup> Thus women learn to smile, look down, and accept interruptions. In a particular way, women are taught how to sit, occupy space, and adopt appropriate postures.

For example, among the emerging bourgeoisie of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was forbidden for a woman to play the cello since it would have required her to spread her legs.<sup>6</sup> When in 1845 a female cellist first performed publicly, it was not her musical skill that took center stage but rather “the shameful and obliquely-posed question whether this musician would dare to take the instrument between her legs.”<sup>7</sup> In bourgeois society a female musician — in contrast to a female member of the aristocracy — was subject to strict regulations. Women in the eighteenth century in particular were “rigidly subjected” to a newly developed “mimetic ideal”<sup>8</sup> that forbade any overly emotional facial expressions. Yet not only was the choice of instrument regulated, but also the instrumental piece itself. In their performances, women were “not to overstep the boundaries of tender femininity.”<sup>9</sup> The piece was to be limited to the higher, “feminine” register; a hearty virtuoso piece performed with the entire body would be regarded as improper.

This example shows the wide-reaching consequences that were drawn from a gender-adequate habitus, particularly in the nineteenth century —

3. J. Lorber, *Gender-Paradoxien* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 1999), p. 68.

4. Cf. Bourdieu, *Die männliche Herrschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), p. 48.

5. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, pp. 27-28.

6. Cf. F. Hoffmann, *Instrument und Körper. Die musizierende Frau in der bürgerlichen Kultur* (Frankfurt am Main/Leipzig: Insel, 1991), pp. 196ff.

7. Hoffmann, *Instrument und Körper*, p. 197.

8. Hoffmann, *Instrument und Körper*, p. 51.

9. Hoffmann, *Instrument und Körper*, p. 206.

the period when that dichotomous gender metaphysic (with which we still struggle today) was developed. Today, moral importance is still attached to a woman's posture, and this is clearly differentiated from the male perception of the body. The image of a drunken woman in public — who can no longer control her own body — generally strikes us as much more negative than that of a drunken man. Furthermore, girls and women are only given limited freedom to move their bodies: a woman's clothing reduces her possibilities for movement. It "has the effect not only of masking the body but of continuously calling it to order . . . without ever needing to prescribe or proscribe anything explicitly . . . either because it constrains movement in various ways, like high heels or the bag which constantly encumbers the hands, and above all the skirt which prevents or hinders certain activities (running, various ways of sitting, etc)."<sup>10</sup> The collection of these mostly implicit "calls to order" then result in a particular posture that persists even when the clothes no longer demand it: young women in pants and flat shoes still often walk with quick, small steps. These continual, tacit orders lead most women to completely accept arbitrary gender norms and proscriptions as natural and self-evident, "proscriptions which, inscribed in the order of things, insensibly imprint themselves in the order of bodies."<sup>11</sup>

In this way, the social order leads to a significant transformation of the body and mind, "imposing a differentiated definition of the legitimate uses of the body . . . which tends to exclude from the universe of the feasible and thinkable everything that marks membership of the other gender . . . to produce the social artifact of the manly man or the womanly woman. The arbitrary *nomos* which institutes the two classes in objectivity takes on the appearance of a law of nature . . . only at the end of a somatization of the social relations of domination."<sup>12</sup>

## 2. The Opacity and Inertia of Corporeally Anchored Schemes

In Western society — unlike traditional societies — male domination works in a very subtle way. It is a symbolic, gentle, and invisible form of violence that reproduces the asymmetrical order of dual sexuality. It ensures that men and women develop a differing *habitus* and brings women to submit "voluntarily"

10. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 29.

11. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 56.

12. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 23.

to the gender norm, and to limit themselves when they become mothers, for example, within the home or within a private female world. "The effect of symbolic domination . . . is exerted . . . through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that are constitutive of habitus. . . . Thus, the paradoxical logic of masculine domination and feminine submissiveness, which can, without contradiction, be described as both spontaneous and extorted, cannot be understood until one takes account of the durable effects that the social order exerts on women (and men)."<sup>13</sup>

Young girls and boys become familiar with the binary schemes of perception and appreciation through the experience of a gender-differentiated social order and through socialization and upbringing. Yet this remains inaccessible to consciousness. "Already at five years old children participate in what they perceive to be normal male or female activities."<sup>14</sup> Generally, this leads them to accept the social order as normal and natural just as it is. Thus most people anticipate their own fate, so to speak, both by rejecting those career opportunities that are not allowed for and by pursuing those options that "naturally" suggest themselves. Correspondingly, we find that the appropriate functions or occupations for women are an extension of their domestic function — such as caring, teaching, the raising of children, social networking, assisting, and advising. As Bourdieu points out: "The constancy of habitus that results from this is thus one of the most important factors in the relative constancy of the structure of the sexual division of labour."<sup>15</sup> Since these processes are beyond conscious control, this leads us to witness the often-observed discrepancy between formulated, emancipatory declarations on the one hand, and factual, relatively traditional, and gender-typical behavior on the other.

Last, but not least, the asymmetry in the experience of corporeality is evident in sexual practices and conceptions. Thus young men in particular describe a sexual relationship completely in the logic of conquest, while young women are socially prepared to experience sexuality as an emotionally, highly charged experience.<sup>16</sup>

The creation of gender-differentiated habitus takes place in an essentially unobservable and insidious way. It is carried by a form of power "that is exerted

13. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, pp. 37-38.

14. H. Kotthof, "Geschlechtstypisierung in der kindlichen Kommunikationsentwicklung. Ein Bericht über ausgewählte Forschung," in *Jahrbuch für Pädagogik 1994. Geschlechterverhältnisse und die Pädagogik* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 271.

15. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 95.

16. Cf. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 20.

on bodies, directly and as if by magic.”<sup>17</sup> This symbolic violence is branded upon the deepest parts of the body in the form of dispositions that are deeply anchored in our bodies. When the body blushes, shivers, or acts reflexively, it does so withdrawn from the directives of consciousness. Thus women often tacitly accept the barriers laid upon them, which leads to the contemporary self-exclusion of women in place of those explicit exclusions that are today prohibited by law in Western society. The foundation of symbolic violence lies in the dispositions that lend their hypnotic power to social injunctions, suggestions, seduction, threats, and reproaches.<sup>18</sup> Emancipation certainly cannot be achieved merely through a “dawning of consciousness” or through enlightenment regarding this situation. Such an approach fails to appreciate the opacity and inertia that stem from the embedding of social structures in bodies.<sup>19</sup>

And of course, these observations are also valid for men. Men too are prisoners of dominant gender conceptions and must learn over the long-term what it means to be a man, and thus superior. “Being a man, in the sense of *vir*, implies an ought-to-be, a *virtus*, which imposes itself in the mode of self-evidence, the taken-for-granted.”<sup>20</sup> In the male body too there is inscribed an ensemble of dispositions, “inscribed in the body in the form of a set of seemingly natural dispositions, often visible in a particular way of sitting and standing, a tilt of the head, a bearing, a gait, bound up with a way of thinking and acting, an ethos, a belief, etc.”<sup>21</sup> In this way, a man also learns to accept behaviors as unavoidable and natural — behaviors that for women are hardly possible. Men lay their arms protectively and possessively across the shoulders of a woman — the reverse image is hardly thinkable.

The social became flesh, and works as an *amor fati*, a bodily inclination. Bourdieu compares the construction of manliness with the construction of the noble man. Both forms of identity — to be manly and to be noble — are products of a social practice of transferal, which ensures that this social identity becomes “natural,” a habitus. As with the nobility, manliness must also be validated by other men and certified by recognized acceptance in the group of “real men.” Many rites in school, the military, and police force contain such corresponding tests of manliness, which testify to the dependence of one’s declaration of masculinity upon the judgment of the group.<sup>22</sup>

17. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 38.

18. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 42.

19. Cf. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 40.

20. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 49.

21. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 49.

22. Cf. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 52.

Manliness is extraordinarily vulnerable. Why else would so much energy in our society be invested in violent male games, above all in sport? Combat sports and the martial arts are particularly good at highlighting the visible signs of masculinity. It is for this reason that women find it particularly difficult to enter those sports.<sup>23</sup> And men must continually prove themselves in those most serious of competitive games: politics and economics. Competition among men, which with the nobility found its classic expression in the duel, therefore plays a central role. To this extent, “male privilege is also a trap, and it has its negative side in the permanent tension and contention, sometimes verging on the absurd, imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances.”<sup>24</sup>

Manliness lives from the fear of the feminine. For this reason, particular forms of courage — as required above all in the military and police force — are finally nothing more than expressions of fear: “fear of losing the respect or admiration of the group . . . and being relegated to the typically female category of ‘wimps.’ . . . What is called ‘courage’ is thus often rooted in a kind of cowardice.”<sup>25</sup> Dictatorships function in a similar way. They live off the fear of men — the fear of being ostracized from the world of “hard men,” murderers and tormentors.

To summarize: It is not the biological body that produces, and is the basis of, gender identity but rather it is the gender order that leads to the feminization and masculinization of bodies, persons, behavioral codes, postures, corporeal experiences, schemes of perception, emotions, and sensations. Our culture directly imprints gender upon the body via a sexually differentiated habitus. In an even more extreme form, this can be observed in cultures that not only imprint upon the body but rather purposefully change or even mutilate it. In parts of Chinese society the feet of young girls were bound into tiny stumps. In some African regions, the clitoris of prepubescent girls is still excised today. These are particularly extreme and painful forms of the gender-differentiated imprinting of the body. Yet they display again the extent to which the human body is to be understood as thoroughly, socially imprinted.

23. While women participate in most forms of sport, sports *per se* are still very segregated and gender-biased. For more detail, see I. Hartmann-Tews et al., eds., *Soziale Konstruktion von Geschlecht im Sport* (Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 2003); and Isolde Karle, “*Da ist nicht mehr Mann noch Frau. . .*” *Theologie jenseits der Geschlechterdifferenz* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2006), pp. 111ff.

24. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 50.

25. Bourdieu, *Male Domination*, p. 52.

### 3. The Complexity and Variety of Nature

One could object that nature does indeed produce clear, binary standards — standards that fail to be appreciated adequately if gender differentiation is simply reduced to differences in habitus. Such an objection requires a detailed response, one that would begin by explaining that the male or the female body does not exist — contrary to what many of the anatomical pictures in our schoolbooks suggest. Language does not simply express some intrinsic meaning found in nature. Language does not simply reflect reality but is rather a cultural system of signs and symbols that only then gives rise to meaning. This is not merely discourse-theoretical sophistry, rather it is evident whenever nature is not immediately pressed into that fixed Procrustean rule of the cultural, binary system of gender; in other words, whenever the attempt is made to perceive gender in a more differentiated, and thus more realistic, way.

Nature does not offer such a precise or far-reaching classification of gender as our binary language conventions would suggest. On the contrary, in nature we find fluid and fluctuating transitions, overlaps, and ambiguities with regard to gender. Culture — with its either-or system that is valid from birth and is thought of as absolutely constant and unchanging — extends radically beyond what nature itself offers. It is precisely such classificatory rigorism that exposes this as a social classification, “since ‘the reality’ of human appearances does not present itself as ‘dimorphic’ as ‘social perception’ believes; ‘actually’ there would be much more cause for ambiguity and ‘androgenous doubt.’”<sup>26</sup>

Not least, the long-denied existence of those who are physically intersexual testifies to this issue today. That which we see externally does not always correspond to that which exists or is lacking internally: hormone levels, gonads, and the genome. The term “intersexuality” gathers together a wide variety of such physical “inconsistencies.” Intersexual individuals exhibit a physical mixture of male and female characteristics. Thus some newborns possess internal testicles and a masculine genetic composition even though they appear externally to be female and are therefore classified as such — since as far as cultural classification is concerned, morphological gender is decisive. Thus so-called “XY women” have a male set of chromosomes yet appear externally as females. There are many other forms of intersexuality.<sup>27</sup> According to the bi-

26. H. Tyrell, “Geschlechtliche Differenzierung und Geschlechterklassifikation,” in *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 38 (1986): 462.

27. Presentation is variously estimated at between 1:50 and 1:2000. According to Fausto-



ologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, many bodies evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females.<sup>28</sup> What this displays is that nature encompasses more than just two unambiguous genders. It moves back and forth between both poles with flexible boundaries and transitions. “Sex does not represent a fixed criterion but rather a flexible and variable template.”<sup>29</sup> It is thanks to biology, with its exact scientific method, that we see the diversity in individual male and female appearances as well as just how fluid the transitions are from female to male.

The plurality of ethnophysiology also points us in the same direction. Genders do not always refer to the same things in all places. There are cultures that distinguish between more than two genders and that even provide relatively easy options for gender changes — notably without the need for altering the insignia of physical gender. Moreover, many of the differences in bodily experience that are commonly attributed to natural physical dimorphism are more precisely the result (rather than the cause) of this binary gender differentiation — for example with respect to physical strength and hormone levels.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, when dealing with experiences of the body, gender beliefs function as self-fulfilling prophecies. Thus differences in the pitch of one’s voice or in intonation cannot simply be attributed to anatomical differences but are significantly reinforced, if not actually produced, by cultural conventions. In contrast to Asian culture, in the West the pitch of women’s voices has become noticeably deeper over the last decades, to the point where some voices (e.g. that of the American pop singer Tracy Chapman) are no longer immediately recognizable as female.

One of the main arguments constantly to be advanced for binary gender classification points to the fact that only women can become mothers. According to common sense, it is this fact that in principle distinguishes

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Sterling’s definition of intersexuality, 1.7 percent of human births are intersexual. The very different estimations depend on the definition of intersexuality (from any deviation of the usual phenotype to true hermaphroditism).

28. Cf. A. Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); and A. Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Women and Men* 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2000). See also S. Schröter, *FeMale. Über Grenzverläufe zwischen den Geschlechtern* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2002).

29. According to the biologist M. Maurer, “Sexualdimorphismus, Geschlechtskonstruktion und Hirnforschung,” in *Wie natürlich ist Geschlecht? Gender und die Konstruktion von Natur und Technik*, ed. U. Pasero and A. Gottburgsen (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002), p. 100.

30. Cf. I. Karle, “*Da ist nicht mehr Mann noch Frau. . .*” pp. 100ff.; on physical strength cf. esp. the chapter on gender and sport, pp. 111ff.

women from men. In the West, especially since the nineteenth century, far-reaching assumptions were drawn from the concept of motherhood (particularly among the bourgeoisie), which not only associated pregnancy and birth with women but even the raising of children and housework, as well as representing warmth, security, and empathy as genuinely feminine virtues. In contrast, men had to prove themselves out in the hostile world, taking control of the public realm and thus the power centers of society. To this day we are still striving to dismantle this bourgeois gender metaphysics and its associated gender virtues.

Yet at this point, one should also note that neither motherhood nor menstruation, lactation, and pregnancy fundamentally distinguish women from men. Not all women will become pregnant or bear a child. The reasons here are not only socio-cultural. For those women who want to have children yet are unable to, the reasons are also often physiological. Statisticians estimate that of those women born after 1960 approximately one quarter will remain childless; for those born after 1965 this figure could rise to one third. Thus in this respect, motherhood cannot form a constitutive element of their gender classification. And even when women do become pregnant (or currently are), they only remain so for a limited time. "Menstruation, lactation and pregnancy are individual experiences of female existence but are not a determinant of the social categories 'female' or 'woman.'"<sup>31</sup> The bearing of children as well as "menstruation, which is understood as a sign of a woman's childbearing ability are valid neither for all 'women' nor at all times for any one woman. It is not its realization but rather the attribution of the possibility which is then linked with gender."<sup>32</sup>

In this respect, focusing only on the "biological" fact of motherhood is not enough to distinguish in principle between women and men. It is even far less useful for the interpretation and mythologization of motherhood. From a historical and intercultural perspective, the appointment of women to motherly duties and their specialization upon these tasks (as is typical in Western middle-class families), has been the exception rather than the rule.<sup>33</sup> Many societies have judged the role of motherhood as one of only secondary

31. Lorber, *Gender-Paradoxien*, p. 87.

32. C. Hagemann-White, "Wir werden nicht zweigeschlechtlich geboren . . .," in *Frauen-MännerBilder. Männer und Männlichkeit in der feministischen Diskussion*, ed. C. Hagemann-White and M. R. Rerrich (Bielefeld: AJZ-Verlag, 1988), p. 229.

33. Cf. H. Tyrell, "Überlegungen zur Universalität geschlechtlicher Differenzierung," in *Aufgaben, Rollen und Räume von Frau und Mann*, ed. J. Martin and R. Zoepffel (Freiburg/München: Alber, 1989), p. 60.

importance and have managed without a corresponding differentiation based on such a division of labor.<sup>34</sup>

To summarize: The physiological facts do not organize themselves into a system of two genders; they do not by themselves inevitably push us on toward a binary classification. This relativization of the obvious difference between men and women does not at all mean the underestimation of corporeality. It is not that the anatomical differences of the human body should be denied. There is a natural body, but as soon as we picture and describe it, it stops being a natural body. A strict, binary, dichotomous view then takes hold — a view through which modern culture perceives the body, loading it with meaning and then, if necessary, even surgically transforming it so that it finally “fits” within the social classification.<sup>35</sup> If gender is externally unclear at the time of birth, this is generally made more clear by the use of surgical intervention. In medical terminology, one speaks of a surgical clarification, a procedure that has been practiced in Western culture since the middle of the twentieth century. Parents are advised to choose the child’s future gender according to what is surgically easiest to achieve. Only since the 1990s has this procedure come under increasing critique. Gender ambivalence is obviously unacceptable for our culture. Even intersexual persons, whose “anomalies” only become apparent in later life, must often submit themselves to painful and completely unnecessary operations.<sup>36</sup>

34. Cf. Tyrell, “Überlegungen zur Universalität geschlechtlicher Differenzierung,” p. 61. Despite the social changes of the last decades, in Western culture the socio-emotional primacy of the mother-child relationship still remains normatively valid. This is due in no small part to the influence of popularized developmental psychology, which attributes high priority to motherly care for small children (“good enough mothering”). Hartmann Tyrell notes: “The modern female dilemma between family and profession visibly has its roots in the fact that the role of the mother has been culturally accepted and accentuated as such a demanding role.” H. Tyrell, “Soziologische Überlegungen zur Struktur des bürgerlichen Typus der Mutter-Kind-Beziehung,” in *Lebenswelt und soziale Probleme. Verhandlungen des 20. Deutschen Soziologentages zu Bremen 1980*, ed. J. Matthes (Frankfurt am Main/New York: Campus, 1981), p. 424. German mothers often only see themselves as good mothers when they are able to ensure their continual physical presence twenty-four hours a day. Vinken speaks here of the “fetish of the presence of the maternal body”; B. Vinken, *Die deutsche Mutter. Der lange Schatten eines Mythos* (München: Piper, 2001), p. 154.

35. T. Laqueur gives an impressive overview here with respect to biology and its ideological forms of perception in past and more recent history. Cf. Laqueur, *Auf den Leib geschrieben*.

36. Thus, for example, the testicles of one XY woman were removed, which led to the subsequent presentation of significant physical and psychological problems. Cf. Karle, “*Da ist nicht mehr Mann noch Frau*,” pp. 98f.

#### 4. Complementary Gender Difference in Theology

Twentieth-century Christian theology and social ethics largely reflected this nineteenth-century, bourgeois gender metaphysics, though certainly without recognizing its socio-cultural limitations. In the twentieth century, Karl Barth was particularly vocal on this topic, referring to the creation narratives in an attempt to establish “the natural supremacy” of the man (and thus the nonreciprocity of the man–woman relationship). “She is I as his Thou. She is [a person] as the completion of his humanity.”<sup>37</sup> These sentences from the *Church Dogmatics* are typical of the modern idea of complementarity, which Christian social ethics has largely identified (or confused) with biblical patterns of thought. This quote clearly exposes the way that the “complementary theory” of equality in difference is always thought of asymmetrically, even to this day: the motherly woman is related to the man as an attentive carer; she is not herself a subject but is rather created for the completion of his humanity, whereas the man, as an autonomous subject, makes his way out into the hostile world and attempts to prove himself there in games of competition. In the background we find the idea of opposing male and female spheres of thought, emotion, and action.

This ideology was expressed once again quite clearly several years ago in the doctrinal document “On the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church,” released by the Catholic Church’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.<sup>38</sup> According to the church jargon of the statement, the creation narrative confirms the permanent difference between men and women. The woman is essentially bride and companion and devotes herself to the well-being of others. These attributes are not cultural but rather arise from the incontrovertible will of the creator God: “From the first moment of their creation, man and woman are distinct, and will remain so for all eternity.”<sup>39</sup> It belongs to the “genius of women” to be there for the family. Motherhood is her nature. Thus neither are women allowed to compete with men. The decisive exemplar for all women is Mary: her willingness to suffer, her natural self-withdrawal, her posture of humility and faithfulness. The precariousness of such a “revaluation” of femininity can be seen in the consequences to which it

37. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1 (London: T. & T. Clark/Continuum, 2004), p. 309.

38. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the church and in the world (May 31, 2004). Published online at [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html).

39. *Ibid.* p. 12.

leads: Due to the essential difference between men and women, only men are permitted to become priests. Even the maleness of Jesus is no accident but is rather claimed as an ontological necessity.

Even in the liberal tradition, which otherwise sees itself as the champion of personal individuality, there is no real break from this complementary gender construction. While contemporary liberal social ethicists do generally recognize that female virtues and behaviors are historically informed, they still stress that differences between men and women are to be recognized. The social ethicist Dieter Korsch even goes so far as to claim that in the relationship between men and women there are still nonreducible, biologically determined, fundamentally opposed differences that aim at an asymmetrical relationship.<sup>40</sup>

Thus while current social ethicists provide different accents, nowhere do we find any problematization of the idea that a person can only ever be either completely male (and thus finally hegemonic) or completely female (and thus motherly and caring). Instead, it is just seen as divinely willed and as a given fact of nature. The modern construct of the duality of genders is fundamentalized. And thus social ethics unreflectively follows typical modern stereotypes that (empirically) increasingly prove themselves to be precisely that: stereotypes and clichés. Today, reality increasingly shows us that there are caring fathers and female politicians conscious of their own power; there are emotionally uncontrolled men and cool-thinking, taciturn women; that mathematics and technology is not a male privilege, and that languages and welfare activities are not a female one.

Furthermore, social ethics still continues to associate the naturalness of binary genders with the imperative to procreation, thus generally unifying marriage and the family. In response, on the one hand one must say that from a Protestant perspective sexuality is not immediately related to procreation. Sexuality is a divine gift that can greatly enrich and intensify the relationship between two persons. On the other hand, today the married lifestyle can no longer be described in a unified way. It has differentiated itself into many varying models. Thus there are currently many marriages that remain childless by choice, not only due to an underlying inability to bear children. In this respect, marriage cannot automatically be equated with a family.

As such, it is high time that Christian social ethics takes into account

40. Cf. D. Korsch, *Dogmatik in Grundriss. Eine Einführung in die christliche Deutung menschlichen Lebens mit Gott* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2000), pp. 97f. According to Korsch, the distinction between men and women is in principle the most extreme case of difference, to be understood as a community of “elementary opposites” that relate to each other in a complementary way (p. 99).

this reality as well as the great variety of “gender migrants,” and stops seeing the plurality of individuals as a threat to the institution of marriage but rather as a liberation from the cultural chains of a historically contingent gender order that oppresses and excludes so many intersexuals, homosexuals, transgenders, “unmanly” men, and “unwomanly” women. Yet in doing so, can it possibly appeal to the Judeo-Christian tradition and Christianity’s own self-understandings?

## 5. Creation and New Creation: Life in the Spirit of Freedom

To this day, it is primarily the creation narratives, especially Genesis 1:27, which are repeatedly called upon to provide a biblical basis not only for heterosexual preference and the institution (or “created order”) of marriage but also the conception of two completely different, gendered beings. Even in feminist theology, repeated reference has been made to this passage (with the best intentions yet with paradoxical effects) in order to claim both the equality of women and their essential difference from men. Thus binary gender becomes the linchpin of the *imago Dei*. But in doing so we essentially miss the meaning of this passage.

The concept of the *imago Dei* is based on ancient Near Eastern royal ideology. In Egypt, the pharaoh was the image of God, and he would commission others to produce statues of himself. Though cultic images were forbidden in ancient Israel, this certainly did not mean an end to the concept of the image of God.<sup>41</sup> Thus in Genesis 1:27 we see the concept arise in a modified way: the image of God here shall not be statues but rather living human beings, an audacious concept in a cultural environment that only saw God represented through concrete images. Yet even more audacious is the associated idea that it is not only the king or pharaoh who is the image of God but rather all human beings. All persons, women as well as men, are to represent God in the created world, shaping it in accordance with his will. As such, to be an image of God did not mean corresponding to God in appearance or form but rather in function: that is, representing divine power in the world. Therefore in Genesis 1:27 the stress does not lie on the distinction between man and woman but upon a dignity and duty imparted and assigned to all human

41. Cf. here and for some following points: A. Schüle, “Made in the ‘Image of God’: The Concepts of Divine Images in Gen 1–3,” in *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117, no. 1 (2005): 1–20.

beings. The creation narrative aims at the participation of a totality, not at establishing the bipolarity of a dual gender system, let alone marriage. The stress in Genesis 1:27 falls upon a tendency to equality and inclusiveness, not upon the heterosexual pair.<sup>42</sup>

Even if one does not share this “relecture” — and the biblical traditions are undoubtedly shaped by patriarchal forms of thought and androcentric perspectives — one cannot ignore that Jesus (with his inclusive table fellowship) and the early Christian movement (with their shocking and by no means conflict-free eucharistic praxis) radically transcended the boundaries of race, ethnicity, social position, and gender.<sup>43</sup> Some exegetes<sup>44</sup> even suggest that it was precisely this boundary-crossing praxis that distinguished the early church movement from its social and religious environment and enabled it to develop into a new religion. Here the baptismal formula in Galatians 3:28 provides a significant proof: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>45</sup>

Let me come directly to the point and stave off any misunderstandings: Paul should not be instrumentalized here for a constructivist gender theology. Paul had no interest in feminist theology and often lingered quite far behind the standard that is expressed in Galatians 3:28. Nor should one deny his homophobic tendencies. Yet nevertheless we see in the baptismal formula that through faith in Christ the early Christian community enjoyed and practiced an incredible freedom with regard to cultural attributions and constraints. In baptism, Christians enter into the domain and jurisdiction of the new creation. Modern New Testament scholarship unanimously suggests that the resulting new social order was an empirically experienced reality and not merely a utopia. The field of women’s studies has already shown comprehensively that women were apostles and were in leadership positions within the community. By being in Christ, former differences fell away. Here we encounter the existence of a new togetherness of human beings. These communities were

42. For greater detail, cf. Karle, “*Da ist nicht mehr Mann noch Frau*,” pp. 217–27, and on the paradise narrative in Genesis 2–3 (pp. 201–17).

43. Cf. here the exegetical papers in M. Ebner, ed., *Herrenmahl und Gruppenidentität* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007); and G. Theißen and A. Merz, *Der historische Jesus. Ein Lehrbuch* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); as well as Jürgen Roloff, *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993).

44. Cf. M. Ebner, “Von den Anfängen bis zur Mitte des 2. Jahrhunderts,” in *Ökumenische Kirchengeschichte. Von den Anfängen bis zum Mittelalter*, Bd 1, ed. Th. Kaufmann, R. Kottje, B. Moeller, and H. Wolf (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006), pp. 15–57.

45. Cf. Karle, “*Da ist nicht mehr Mann noch Frau*,” pp. 227ff.

spaces marked by the actual revolutionary reorganization of interpersonal relationships.<sup>46</sup>

In Christ, the attributes of this world are no longer valid — there is no more the criteria of race and class, “no more male and female” and, extending the sentence’s line of argument, also “no more heterosexual or homosexual.” Through baptism, in the new creation in Christ, we see the destruction of all boundaries between men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, rich and poor, black and white. New social behavior is made possible, behavior that is no longer oriented to the cultural customs of classification. In this way, the social order of binary genders is deeply relativized and transformed. What we are dealing with is the liberating release of individual experiences and talents beyond those culturally imposed restraints that impair persons, oppressing and disfiguring them, and compelling them constantly to conform themselves and their bodies to their assigned maleness or femaleness.

That Galatians 3:28 should be understood in this revolutionary way can be displayed in the direct and obvious reference to the “old creation” in Genesis 1. The Septuagint version of Genesis 1:27 is adopted word for word in Galatians 3:28c — and it is presented as its antithesis: “God created them male and female” (Gen. 1:27) becomes a direct negation: “no male and female” (Gal. 3:28c).<sup>47</sup> “Eschatologically, an extremely fundamental transcendence of gender is emphasized here.”<sup>48</sup> By “‘putting on Christ’ in a type of eschatological travesty (1 Cor. 15:53f.; 2 Cor. 5:2-4), [the believers] are incorporated with their entire existence into Christ’s salvific sphere.”<sup>49</sup> A radical change of identity occurs. Their gender identity is “subversively dissolved”;<sup>50</sup> from a bodily, spiritual, and cognitive perspective they have been freed from repressive gender norms. The old creation is transcended, the order of the old world is exalted and subsumed through the new creation in Christ.

To carry each other’s burden (Gal. 6:2) and to live in the freedom of the

46. Cf. J. Roloff, *Die Kirche im Neuen Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), p. 94.

47. Cf. H. Thyen, “. . . nicht mehr männlich und weiblich. . . .” Eine Studie zu Galater 3,28,” in *Als Mann und Frau geschaffen. Exegetische Studien zur Rolle der Frau* ed. H. Thyen and F. Crüsemann (Gelnhausen: Burckhardthaus, 1978), p. 109.

48. R. Heß, “‘Es ist noch nicht erschienen, was wir sein werden.’ Biblisch (de)konstruktivistische Anstöße zu einer entdualisierten Eschatologie der Geschlechterdifferenz,” in *Alles in allem. Eschatologische Anstöße*, FS JC Janowski, ed. R. Heß and M. Leiner (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), p. 310. Thus the new figuration of gender in baptism also has a thoroughly bodily dimension.

49. Heß, “‘Es ist noch nicht erschienen, was wir sein werden,’” p. 311.

50. Heß and Leiner, eds., *Alles in allem*.



Spirit, which no longer allows any slavery and body-soul justifications of any kind (Gal. 5:11ff.), these are signs of the new creation. This leads to the creation of a free space that allows people to live together in a “de-dualized” and anti-hierarchical way. For in Christ the new creation is at hand, the old has passed away, the new is emerging (2 Cor. 5:17). While the early church community practiced this approach at least partly, they also realistically pointed out that even our most elementary self-perceptions still require transformation in a way that is hardly imaginable to us: “We are now children of God, yet what we will be has not yet been made known” (1 John 3:2). This present, fragmentarily experienced corporeality and identity will only be unpacked properly in the eschaton. Yet at the same time, faith in Christ is already breaking apart disastrous and dichotomizing attributions and models of expectation in the present, setting free new experiences both of body, soul, and spirit.

## **6. Body, Soul, and Spirit: From Difference to Creative Plurality**

However one wishes to evaluate the precarious “physical foundation” of gender identity, it is clear that social and cultural norms are superimposed on the body and have a far-reaching influence on both soul and spirit. And however optimistically or pessimistically one might judge the transformative and liberating power of the biblical traditions in this context, they expressly prohibit their use in grounding a naïve insistence upon a natural gender differentiation, to forcefully integrate women (and men) unwillingly into bourgeois gender clichés, and to oppress, disparage, disfigure, and damage intersexuals, homosexuals, and gender migrants of all forms.

Theology and the church must develop more sensitivity to the ways in which they have contributed to a gender system that still continues to oppress and disfigure souls and bodies. To this extent, a sociological as well as theological (self-)enlightenment about the diverse interdependencies of body, soul, and spirit with respect to gender identity is required if theology and the church no longer wish to participate in the cultural ideologization of bodies and identities. If the Spirit does not distribute its gifts along cultural lines of difference but rather provocatively crosses boundaries, then the name of Jesus Christ can no longer be used to label and assign people to antiquated gender types.

This then challenges both theology and particularly the church to stop uncritically supporting modern gender metaphysics, and instead to promote a creative body-soul variety that distances itself from a culturally demanded dichotomization and its potential for repression. The church should encour-

age people in all their variety to develop their God-given gifts, abilities, and talents. Yet this also means that the quality of relationships (and not of already-determined normative roles) becomes the criterion of responsible Christian relationships and community. From this perspective, the church can only welcome it when Christian same-sex couples wishing to live long-term together come and ask for God's blessing on their shared journey, just as with traditional weddings.<sup>51</sup> In the end, it is not an orientation to the anatomical details of a body, but rather a life in the spirit of Christ, a spirit of love, trust, and freedom, that is the characteristic mark of the church of Christ.

51. For greater detail on the consequences for church politics, cf. Karle, "*Da ist nicht mehr Mann noch Frau*," pp. 237-70.