the coyness of his age; but it is a startling omission, as anyone seriously engaged in non-discursive prayer will testify. It involves, of course, the most curious of all Chapman's *excerptions* from John of the Cross's writing; for at no point does Chapman even mention the poetry around which John's entire corpus is constructed, a poetry rejoicing in the erotic metaphors of the *Song of Songs*. Chapman has nothing whatever to tell us about the connection between sexual desire and the desire for God; John of the Cross has – at least implicitly – a great deal.

To conclude: Chapman's *Spiritual Letters* have been justly influential. His practical and perceptive advice on 'beginners'' contemplation is almost unmatched in its charting of the unchartable. 'The intellect is facing a blank and the will follows it' (*SL*, 76); this 'near nonsense' of Chapman's, as Sebastian Moore has described it, this love affair with a 'blank', probes to the heart of what the contemplative has to express if she/he is to speak in any way adequately of God.[19] More than one English generation, then, both Roman Catholic and Anglican, has taken Chapman's reading of John of the Cross as normative, has seen John through Chapman's lens. In this essay I have attempted to show at what points Chapman in fact adjusts, amplifies, excerpts from – even distorts – John's original meaning. True to his Benedictinism, Chapman is eclectic, forging his own synthesis.[20] It is a brilliant and insightful reading of John of the Cross; but it is not the whole picture. Let us call it 'sanjuanism with a stiff upper lip'.

What, then, has Chapman *not* told us? His account of 'contemplation' – for all its extraordinary practical acuity – requires a more deeply realistic excursus on the messy entanglement of authoritative claims to divine power, on the one hand, and of human abuses on the other; of frail human sexuality, on the one hand, and of the divine erotic allure on the other; of creative gender play, on the one hand, and of gender prescription on the other. Thus it is time to look more closely at this deep problem of discernment that we have unearthed: the profoundest levels of 'contemplative' activity do not escape the constraints (sometimes distorting or harmful constraints) of the 'frail earthern vessels' in which they are carried. To this task of discernment we now turn, adjusting our gaze to the more inclusive theme of human 'creaturehood' before God.

19 See Sebastian Moore, 'Some principles for an adequate theism', *The Downside Review* 95, 1977, 201–13.

20 See Jean Leclercq, art. cit. (n. 1 above), p. 63, and also the citation from Benedict's *Rule* on p 54. Chapman's *SL* draw on a wide range of authorities at points, including Evagrius, the Macarian homilies, Thomas Aquinas, *The Cloud*, Teresa of Ávila, Ignatius of Loyola, as well as John of the Cross and Père de Caussade.

Sarah Coakley, Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender. Challenges in Contemporary Theology, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002.

Chapter 3

CREATUREHOOD BEFORE GOD: MALE AND FEMALE

'The human soul comes directly from God, and therefore finds its happiness by returning direct to God', writes Thomas Aquinas (X *Quodlibets*, viii. I). The Christian tradition presents no single normative understanding of what it means to be a creature; indeed it is not even clear to me that there exists a *uniquely* 'Christian' standpoint on creatureliness: the quotation from Aquinas is sufficient to remind us of the lasting entanglement of the Neoplatonic theme of 'return' with the Nicaean insistence on a free personal creation *ex nihilo*; and further paradoxes confront us with the realization that even creation *ex nihilo* is difficult to justify from Scripture alone.[1] But at the heart of any Christian doctrine of creaturehood must surely lie, as perhaps Aquinas' theology illuminates above all, the notion of a radical, and qualitatively distinct, *dependence* of the creature on God. It is this constellating theme of creaturely dependence, along with what I shall argue have been its fatal cultural admixtures for women in Christian patriarchal society, which I wish to explore in this chapter.

My analysis will employ what may seem to some an untidy combination of themes from Christian iconography and spirituality, psychoanalytic theory, and secular and theological feminism, as well as from the more usual resources of biblical and systematic theology. Such messiness is however nothing but the methodological counterpart of the equally messy entanglement of the theme of creaturely dependence on God with *different* sorts of human dependence. Official doctrinal formulations and theological discussion on 'creatureliness' traditionally ignore or repress reflection on these entanglements, and hence the need to probe to the 'soft underbelly' of the doctrine, to expose by reference to popular symbolism and spiritual

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1 The interpretation of 2 Macc. 7.28 is disputed.

practice the wider ramifications of the theme of 'dependence'. Dorothee Soelle has posed the necessary questions succinctly:

> It seems to me that at the core of all feminist philosophy or theology there lies this matter of 'dependency'... Is it a good thing to make oneself emotionally independent, or would this only lead us to the position of the male with his superficial ties who would not dare attack the ideological independence of the male heroes? What does it mean anthropologically to be dependent? What does it mean in social life? The area covered by this inter-feminist debate is also the area where decisions have to be made in theory. Is this dependency only a repressive inheritance from the past or is it part of the simple fact that we are created?[2]

I have elsewhere[3] sought to describe and explicate – in trinitarian terms – the unique sense of creaturely dependence that silent prayer inculcates, a dependence unlike any other, for in it what is experienced as noetic blankness is theologically explained as 'that-without-which-there-would-be-nothing-at-all'.[4] This then is radical, absolute – and so intellectually ungraspable – creaturely dependence; to grasp it would be to make God into an entity. But God is by definition ungraspable, and towards God the dependent creature yearns inchoately, with 'the restless heart' of quasi-erotic unfulfilment. The recurring metaphor is that of 'ascent' to divine intimacy (whether Gregory of Nyssa's dark operation of the 'spiritual senses', for instance, or Bernard of Clairvaux's more openly erotic 'kiss of the mouth'); and the undeniable interconnection of sexual desire and contemplative desire for God is celebrated in the elaboration of the themes of the *Song of Songs* from Origen to St John of the Cross. But the unresolved antinomy between the (acceptable) erotic desire for the divine on the one hand, and actual relationships with people of the opposite sex on the other, is as tense, if not tenser, than in the Platonic writings from which Christianity inherited it.[5]

Now the paradox for the feminist who surveys this material, and who herself experiences the tug of the dependent heart on the divine, is this. The

[2] In J.-B. Metz and E. Schillebeeckx (eds.), *God as Father?* (Edinburgh and New York 1981) pp. 73–4.

[3] In *We Believe in God* (London 1987) ch.7, as a member of the Church of England Doctrine Commission.

[4] Here I acknowledge my indebtedness to Sebastian Moore's argument in 'Some Principles for an Adequate Theism', *The Downside Review*, 95 (1977) pp. 201–13.

[5] See for instance Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*: one 'ascends' from actual love affairs finally to the vision of 'the beautiful'.

metaphor of 'ascent' is a metaphor of power and hierarchy; the Cappadocian doctrine of the Trinity announces on the one hand the absolute equality of the 'persons' according to the *homoousian* principle; but in describing the incorporation of the soul into the divine life through prayer, Basil of Caesarea's debt to Neoplatonic subordinationism is scarcely veiled:[6] the Spirit catches one *up* so that one may ascend to the level of the Son, and then via him glimpse something of the dizzier heights of the Father's glory. The Father, of course, is in this Eastern vision the convergent 'source' and 'cause' of the other two 'persons'. This hierarchical Godhead is however symbolically charged with social implications for women: for how is the ceding to the Spirit in the contemplative quest not also implicitly, for a woman, the ceding to potentially repressive and patriarchal structures in church and society?

In the medieval West, as we shall explore a little later, the same trend of dominance is associated with a particular, negative stereotyping of 'female mysticism', arising out of the male mystic's quest to transmute his sexual energy towards God. In search of the dependent creaturely perfection of his ('female') soul, the male contemplative projects onto the real women who might deflect him from this goal all the negativity of his still unresolved desires. Even Bernard of Clairvaux, lauded by Jean Leclercq for his wondrously healthy 'sublimation' of the erotic towards God,[7] can warn his monks that it is quite impossible to have a normal relationship with any woman without it ending in an illicit sexual liaison. This reflects the western Augustinian background we shall explore briefly below: if woman is perceived as intrinsically 'bodily', then she is either a temptress or a 'female' type of saint, also bodily, emotional, 'hysterical'.

We must attempt, then, to *distinguish* more clearly and consciously between different sorts of dependence; not, I believe, because we can ever hope finally to disentangle them, to arrive at the tidy isolation of a pure contemplative dependence on God; but because it is as well to bring to consciousness how easily one fades into another, how the infinitely 'subtle' and 'obscure' operation of the divine on the dependent creature is entwined with the deepest hopes and fears about family relationships, about sexuality, power and death.

Consider then the following distinguishable types of 'dependence'. Alongside what we have called the 'absolute dependence' of the creature on God brought to special consciousness in contemplation, we must range:

[6] See *On the Holy Spirit* 9.23.

[7] Jean Leclercq, *Monks and Love in Twelfth-Century France* (Oxford 1979).

the complete physical dependence of the newborn infant on the mother (or other primary caretaker) for nourishment, warmth and cleanliness; the no less significant emotional and psychological dependence of small, growing, and even grown-up children on parents and parental figures; the economic dependence of families (and so often women) on the wage-earner and bread-winner (or in the case of the unemployed or disabled, on the state or charity); the 'dependence' of servile subjugation or imprisonment in countries subject to oppressive regimes; the dependence of prisoners on their captors; of the tortured on their torturers; the emotional, psychological and sexual dependence of the spouse, the lover – or rather differently, the infatuated – on the beloved; the 'dependence' of slothful mental habit and failure in critical thinking which is the opposite of 'independence of mind'; the arrested infantilism of neurotic dependence; the dependence on drugs (of whatever kind); the dependence we are all subject to, in events beyond our control – the elements, accidents, disease; the dependence on others for sustenance and care in sickness, handicap or mental disturbance; and finally the yielding to the unknown in the 'dependence' of death.

These intertwined themes of dependence find powerful Christian iconographic expression.[8] A vivid example of the sense of the cosmic significance of the mother is to be found in Georgios Klotzas' icon of the Virgin and child at the heart of the world, the spirals of the mandala shape centring in on the supreme mother on whom all are dependent. The fragility of the baby Christ dandled on her knee presents another variation on this theme, whether the Virgin is portrayed as full of concern and foreboding or, more usually, as rapt in pure absorption. This theme may itself contain a pointed reminder of him on whom the Virgin in turn is dependent, and to whom she is submissive: consider, for instance, Stephan Lochner's 'Madonna in a Rose Bower' where the papal Father figure lurks half-hidden at the apex.

In the 'dependence' of death, the cycle comes full circle and the son is again cradled on his mother's knee; but in the Orthodox representation of the Virgin's 'Dormition' the roles are reversed, and the mother's soul is held by Christ as a dependent baby itself now, while the saints mourn over her physical body.

[8] This chapter was originally presented as a paper at a meeting of the Society for the Study of Theology (St Andrews, April 1999), in which the slides alluded to here in the text were shown at the same time as the paper was read. Unfortunately production restrictions for this volume made it impossible to reproduce all the illustrations; the one exception is the Piero della Francesca 'Virgin of Mercy', which appears on the cover of this book and well represents the reality of an *empowered* but transparent female response to the divine.

Mary's role as protector and intermediary, a favourite theme of the late medieval West, suggests not only continuing dependence on the approachable maternal figure, but the desire to flee the dangers of the world and of a potentially vengeful Father God. Thus in the 'Virgin of Mercy' type Mary both shelters the faithful under her robe and acts as point of safe contact with the heavenly realm. In Piero della Francesca's unique representation of this theme, however (depicted on the cover of this volume), Mary achieves the stature of what one might call 'proto-feminist' assurance, and her followers, significantly, are more respectful than cowed. More common, however, are the distinctly neurotic overtones of the hierarchy in which the Virgin *replaces* the (ineffectual?) Spirit; the penitent may safely approach the awesome papal Father only via the Virgin and then the Son, both of whom plead to the Father by reference to their own points of vulnerability and tenderness (Christ's wounds and Mary's breast).

But the Virgin also can be a dominating, awesome, mother-type, to whom submission in turn is due, as powerful, perhaps as overwhelming, as some of the pagan Mother goddesses she replaces. She can also be herself dependent on her own mother, bespeaking that probably universal experience of new mothers of their own fundamental fragility and exhaustion, of their need for being mothered again upon their entry into the awesome responsibilities of motherhood. The chain of dependence creates another hierarchy (in the 'St Anne Trinity' of St Anne, the Virgin, and the Child), perhaps an unwitting pastiche of the visual form of the Eastern hierarchical Trinity discussed above; here, perhaps, is the *matriarchal* power-structure of the Greek extended family centred on the grandmother, a hierarchy no more releasing, I would argue – and doubtless more fearful to a man – than its counterpart in the 'male' Trinity. The tables are turned, only to repeat the subordinationist pathology in reverse.

The Virgin can be represented also as Christ's lover, sexually as well as religiously dependent on his superior divine status. According to Bernard, the Virgin 'ascends to the throne of glory', 'sings a nuptial hymn' and is greeted with 'kisses of [Christ's] mouth'.[9] On this however Marina Warner comments, more with sadness than bitterness, that 'The icon of Mary and Christ side by side is one of the Christian church's most polished deceptions: it is the very image and hope of earthly consummated love used to give that kind of love the lie.'[10] Likewise, the Assumption, greeted by C. G. Jung as

[9] *In Assumptione Beatae Mariae Virginis*, *PL*, 183, col. 996; quoted in Marina Warner, *Alone of all her Sex* (New York 1976) p. 130.
[10] Warner, op. cit., p. 133.

an implicit acknowledgment of the 'equality of women' and as a transformation of the Trinity into a properly balanced quaternity, is again not all that it seems. The Virgin is welcomed into the magic mandala, certainly, but it is visually clear in Fouquet's representation of this scene that she remains in a subordinate and fully dependent submissive position, again as 'befits' a woman.

Finally, but most symbolically redolent of all of Christian prayer and practice, we have the Annunciation, Mary's 'fiat' of ready submission and acceptance of divine will. Despite brave and promising efforts by contemporary feminist theologians to find in the Annunciation a symbol of right 'cooperation' and response to God,[11] or even, more backhandedly, an event at least without active intervention from a human father,[12] we can have no doubt of the implications of the more traditional interpretation for dependent women. Although there are many lovely exceptions, where for instance the Virgin exhibits self-composure as well as obedience, contemplative absorption rather than cowed submission before the angel, the themes of fear, humility and submission in the face of divine command are predominant, and a natural enough interpretation of Luke 1.26ff. Mary, recapitulating and reversing the disobedience and carnal knowledge of Eve, accepts the announcement of the Father God's intentions in obedient, and this time pure, sexual submission. Indeed, it is her willing *passivity* (whether or not this is wholly true to Luke's original intentions)[13] which has so exercised the proponents of 'dependent', contemplative prayer. In the eighteenth-century Père de Caussade's theory of 'abandonment to divine providence', for instance, the theme of contemplative acceptance is woven specifically around the Annunciation story.[14] It is worth remembering, as I have remarked elsewhere,[15] that de Caussade, a Jesuit director of considerable influence and intellectual flair, wrote for nuns already enjoined to a double submission: to their own superiors, and to male confessors and directors. It is not

[11] See for example Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London 1983) ch. 6.

[12] So (the earlier) Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston 1973), p. 84.

[13] See the interesting argument to the contrary by Deborah Middleton, 'The Story of Mary: Luke's Version', *New Blackfriars* (December 1989) pp. 555–64. My own (critical) reflections on the possibilities for a feminist Mariology are to be found in Sarah Coakley, 'Mariology and "Romantic Feminism"' in Teresa Elwes (ed.), *Women's Voices* (London 1992) pp. 97–110.

[14] See Jean-Pieore de Caussade, *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence* (London 1971) p. 31 ff.

[15] Sarah Coakley, '"Femininity" and the Holy Spirit?' in M. Furlong (ed.), *Mirror to the Church* (London 1988) p. 129.

particularly reassuring to find him warning them against 'intellectual curiosity' and recommending yet more 'humble submission'.

Thus we conclude: 'all creatures are dependent, but some are more dependent than others.' The message has had unchartable spiritually stultifying effects for women of many generations; but for men, too (and arguably most acutely since the creation of the Enlightenment cultural ideal of the heroic, lonely, cogitating self), the effects of this adage have been both equally dehumanizing and desiccating. In a brilliantly insightful essay, Mary Midgley has shown how the very creation of such a vision of the self could rest on *unconscious* dependences – in Kant's case, for instance, the domestic dependence on his man-servant![16] The *denial* of creaturely 'dependence', then, is as misleading as is its subordinationist misuse in human hands.

But what then of male creaturely dependence? Does not the Christian tradition provide resources for a riposte to the Enlightenment distortion of the self-sufficient (male) individual? We have already illustrated something of the double-sidedness of this theme in tradition: the urging of the submission of the (significantly 'female') soul to God or the Virgin on the one hand, but the implicit legitimation of male power over female subordination on the other. Jesus' ultimate yielding on the cross in death is the supreme locus for such a theme of male dependence, and as some Christian feminists have urged,[17] this symbolic *depotentiation* of male control, this breaking of societal stereotypes, is what makes for them the retention of a male saviour not only bearable but thoroughly pointed. But again, if we look to the iconographical evidence, especially from the West, we find this theme complicated by the (male) power-play implicit in the relationship between Father and Son at the point of Christ's death. Thus, in the late medieval *Gnadenstuhl* ('throne of grace') type of representation of the Trinity, the Father dispassionately holds up the Son at the moment of death, accepting the just punishment for human sin absorbed into the body of the Man of Sorrows. The paradoxes for the male beholder are evident, and indeed still being played out in modern Western theology. For with whom does the male (whether consciously or unconsciously) most easily identify? *Is* it with the yielding, depotentiated Son, or more truly with the impassive and all-powerful Father, bent on justice and punishment? The paradoxes are only partly relieved by the later reinterpretation of this type in the so-called *Not*

[16] Mary Midgley, 'Sex and Personal Identity: The Western Individualistic Tradition', *Encounter* (June 1984) pp. 50–5.

[17] Notably Angela West, 'A Faith for Feminists?', in J. Garcia and S. Maitland (eds.), *Walking on the Water* (London 1983) pp. 66–90.

...ates representation of the Trinity:[18] here the Father, with increasingly compassionate visage, supports the dead body of his son, whom he has however still abandoned to a lonely and agonizing death.

Themes of male power and subordination are still lurking here then, as too, I believe, are sexual connotations. The symbolic connection between male sexual release and death is well documented in literature; and von Balthasar's argument in his essay 'The Christian and Chastity' is based precisely on this male sexual symbolism:

> In its origin [the New Testament] presents to man and woman a glorious picture of sexual integrity: the Son of God who has become man and flesh, knowing from inside his Father's work and perfecting it in the total self-giving of himself, not only of his spiritual but precisely also of his physical powers... What else is his eucharist but, at a higher level, an endless act of fruitful outpouring of his whole flesh, such as a man can only achieve for a moment with a limited organ of his body?[19]

This line of connection, whatever one thinks of von Balthasar's particular argument here, is one that I suspect is worthy of bringing to greater consciousness.

Yet the seamier side of such a sexual connection is a tendency to sado-masochism; it is essential that we should expose any distorting and destructive aspects of spiritual practice that have been based on such hidden sexual agendas of a punitive type. Sara Maitland, reviewing some pertinent evidence from female saints (Rose of Lima, Margaret Mary Alacoque, and most worryingly, the canonized Maria Goretti, who chose death over loss of 'honour' at the hands of a rapist), poses the right question: 'What can possibly lead women [such as these] to believe that they are more "conformable", more lovable to the God of creation, love and mercy, bleeding, battered and self-mutilated, than they would be joyful, lovely and delighted?'[20] The question applies no less poignantly to men who have trodden this path; but, as Maitland's essay shows, the frenetic quality of some of the evidence relating to women in this area alerts us once more to the hierarchical context in which women have sought with desperation for spiritual equality and perfection.

[18] For both these types see G. Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* II (London 1972).

[19] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations* (London 1975) p. 150.

[20] Sara Maitland, 'Passionate Prayer: Masochistic Images in Women's Experience', in L. Hurcombe (ed.), *Sex and God: Some Varieties of Women's Religious Experience* (London 1987) p. 127.

But the 'hierarchy' – as we have already hinted – is differently enunciated in East and West Christendom, and it is well to be clear about this, if only to highlight the fallibility of some supposed corrections to the problem. In a now classic article, Rosemary Radford Ruether outlined the difference between Gregory of Nyssa's and Augustine's understanding of creation, and of the implications thereof for the place and understanding of female creatureliness.[21] According to Gregory, there is a double creation: in the first instance a non-sexual and purely spiritual creation (for it is assumed by Gregory that to be truly 'in the image of God' the creature must be angelic, non-physical); only in the second instance – and 'with a view to the Fall' – is bodily nature added, both male and female. On this view, then, the female creature is not regarded as intrinsically more physical or bodily than the male; but both the origins and goal of perfect creatureliness lie in a sort of humanoid state, where sexual differentiation is *irrelevant*. In Augustine, by contrast, the existence of the sexes is from the start 'intrinsic to creation', and sexual relations – without passion, however! – are part of God's good intentions. This might appear to be potentially a more promising picture for women, were it not for the sting in the tail: the disjunction of spirit and corporeality, with woman being fatally identified with the latter. Augustine sees the male, alone, as the proper and full image of God. He contains both 'male' spirit and 'female' bodiliness within himself, whereas the woman is *intrinsically* carnal, subordinate to the male, and in the image of God only insofar as she conjoins herself with her husband. The result, as Ruether avers, is that 'woman is not really seen as a self-sufficient, whole person with equal honor, as the image of God in her own right, but is seen, ethically, as dangerous to the male.'[22]

Now if we align this material with the insights already gleaned from attending to the different emphases of Eastern and Western trinitarianism,

[21] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church' in Rosemary Radford Ruether (ed.), *Religion and Sexism* (New York 1974) pp. 150–83. I concur with Ruether's general conclusions in this article as summarized here, but would want to urge that Augustine's position, especially in Book XII of the *De Trinitate*, is more complex and double-sided than Ruether allows. See the further treatment of this material in my forthcoming *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay 'On the Trinity'* (Cambridge, forthcoming) ch. 5; and also the important corrective article by K. E. Børresen, 'In Defence of Augustine: How *Femina is Homo?*', *Collecteana Augustiniana* (1990) pp. 411–28.

[22] Op. cit. pp. 156–7. Much of the relevant material from Gregory and Augustine is conveniently available in Elizabeth A. Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, Delaware 1983).

... may arrive at some interesting results. In the East, first, there emerges a fascinating correlation between the *ideology* of *homoousian* equality in the 'persons' of the Godhead on the one hand, and creaturely equality of humanoid souls on the other. But we cannot help asking whether the *realities* are not in both cases actually more hierarchical and subordinationist than the ideology allows. For all its appeal to the natural and fortuitous inclusiveness of its *anthrōpos* language, the Greek Church – we could surely all agree – is not noted for its granting of equal ministerial roles to women; and it is these *practical* issues which are the acid test in the long run. Even such a moving visual correction of the hierarchical image as Rublev's icon – which employs what is indeed the older and for the East the mainstream, typology of Genesis 18 in attempting a visualization of God – still combines in subtler form the two distinctively Eastern characteristics we have highlighted; the de-sexed or humanoid view of the 'person', and the simultaneous bowing to the Father's monarchy, however delicately done in this case.[23] Thus too the apophaticism for which the East is justly lauded is sometimes capable of being a mask for complacency or a pat response to the feminist challenge. Let anyone who claims that he has passed well beyond the need for 'male' or 'female' images into God, or that (more ingeniously) 'Father' to him means nothing whatever to do with ordinary human fathering,[24] examine his actual relations with women in church and society. Things are not always what they seem.

In the West, however, one may suggest a different point of correlation between the trinitarian theology of Augustine and his views on male and female creatureliness, but one that is perhaps also telling. Running through the various different psychological analogies of the *De Trinitate* is the insistence on the right operation and *harmony* of the faculties of the soul (memory, understanding and will) which mirror the coinherent relations of the divine triad. It is not insignificant, I suggest, that what most offends Augustine about normal sexual activity is the failure of the male will to effect total dispassionate control over the phallus; the harmonious ordering of the soul is disrupted: the body revolts. (The contrast here with Gregory of Nyssa, as Peter Brown has recently illuminated, is of some importance: for Gregory the sexual act itself is apparently not intrinsically worrisome, but rather the implications of human reproduction for the continuing cycle of

[23] It is usually assumed that the figure on the left of the icon is the Father (for this reason).

[24] See the line of approach in *The Forgotten Trinity 1: The Report of the BCC Study Commission on Trinitarian Doctrine Today* (London 1989) p. 39. I was a member of this commission, but I was unconvinced by this particular argument.

births and deaths in a persisting social order.)[25] In Augustine, however, it is not the hope of eschatological flight to a non-sexual realm that is held before us, but rather *actual* sexual relations without loss of control. In this (somewhat joyless) vision of paradise the woman nonetheless remains intrinsically 'bodily' and subordinate to her husband's leading spirit. Now when such assumptions are carried over, much later, into the problematic inner-trinitarian relations of an Anselmian substitutionary atonement theory, a (bodily) female figure may occasionally be brought in visually as the *vinculum amoris*, effecting a *rapprochement* between Father and Son, whether directly as Holy Spirit or, more usually, as the Virgin replacing the Spirit and warding off the wrath of a visually vengeful Father. Christian feminists may again well ask, however, whether these spontaneous projections of female figures into the Godhead, retrieved and welcomed with enthusiasm by some, are really a viable way forward, recapitulating as they do the Western stereotype of bodily, subordinate dependence for women.

To sum up: if in the East we have detected at least a tendency to announce a spurious (and de-sexed) equality for female creatureliness, in the West a more explicit stereotype of subordinate female bodiliness has been the norm. From a Christian feminist standpoint clearly neither of these solutions is agreeable as a systematic view of female creatureliness. In concluding I shall make some brief programmatic suggestions about a way forward.

We may first note a suggestive convergence of themes from secular feminist psychoanalytic theory on the one hand, and Christian feminist atonement theory on the other. In the now classic work of Nancy J. Chodorow,[26] the Freudian theory of the 'castrated', incomplete female is turned on its head. By examining the different implications of the mother–child relationship for gender development in little boys and girls, Chodorow stresses that while girls are still encouraged, in contemporary Western culture, to continue in a state of relational identification with the mother, boys must forge an effective separation from her in order to develop as male 'individuals'. *Contra* Freud, it is this male urge to individuate that needs explaining, not the connectedness of the female identification with the mother. The results however are those gender characteristics thoroughly

[25] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York 1988); see chs. 14 (on Gregory of Nyssa) and 19 (on Augustine). My own views on Nyssa's theological deposit and its potential contemporary significance are developed at greater length in chs. 7–9, below.

[26] Nancy J. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1978) and *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (Oxford 1989).

sanctioned by our society: the 'relational' capacity for empathy and feeling in the female, and the propulsion to autonomy and control in the male. Chodorow's conclusions found interesting corroboration in Carol Gilligan's study of ethical decision-making.[27] Her surveys (on, for instance, decisions over abortion) brought to light in the 'different voice of women . . . an ethics of care, the tie between relationship and responsibility, and the origins of aggression in the *failure* of connection'[28] (my emphasis).

This line of approach – deeply contentious in contemporary secular feminism, for it has a strong tendency to smack of the essentialism it is trying to surmount[29] – finds its theological counterpart in the early pioneering Christian feminist work on 'female' sin and atonement. Thus, in an article originally published in 1960, Valerie Saving urged that the 'temptations of women *as women* are not the same as the temptations of men *as men*', and that whereas 'pride' and 'will-to-power' are the creaturely faults that come naturally to men, in women sinning is more likely to be associated with

> Frivolity, distractability, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing centre or focus; *dependence on others for one's own self-definition*; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality; gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason – in short, underdevelopment or *negation of the self*.[30]

[27] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass. 1982).

[28] ibid. p. 175.

[29] Waves of competing fashion in feminist theory – and differences of political contexts and practical goals – have tended to dictate whether a concentration on gender 'difference' (however construed), its effective obliteration into 'equality of opportunity', or its transmutation into gender 'fluidity', is what is deemed most worthy of pursuit. On the effects of these theoretical changes for feminist theology, see my long survey chapter, 'Feminist Theology' in James C. Livingston, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, with Sarah Coakley and James H. Evans, *Modern Christian Thought* (rev. ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2000) pp. 417–42. My own view is synthetic, as will be clear from the pages of this volume: the goals of 'liberal feminism' (with its roots in an Enlightenment vision of 'equality' for women) are still not met in most parts of the world and should not be lightly swept aside, for all that other aspects of Enlightenment 'individualism' are to be severely critiqued (on this see ch. 5, below); but the emphasis on 'difference' found (somewhat crudely) in the material just cited, and – more subtly and controversially – in the contemporary French feminists, is also of huge political, philosophical and spiritual significance (see below, ch. 6). It is a false move, in my view, to set these perspectives in ultimate logical diremption, despite all the theoretical difficulties of aligning the goals of 'equality' and 'difference'. Once 'difference' is yet further 'differentiated' – as, e.g., in the postmodern gender fluidity of Judith Butler's theories – we are asked to reconsider more critically the stereotypical gender *binaries* of the earlier feminist materials (without, in my view, altogether obliterating the *strategic* force of their rhetorical ploys). On Butler's recent work and the interesting parallelism with some themes in patristic ascetical theology, see ch. 9, below.

Moreover, note again how the cultural effects for women are not just different but *negating*; as a Jungian psychotherapist recently remarked to me (and she deals with a substantial number of women religious): 'It is the combination of *overdependence* and self-*hatred* which is so fatal.'

If we still recognize even *some* aspects of the broad picture of modern female 'creatureliness' outlined here, then obviously a form of compensation for actual stereotyping is an urgent necessity. In part, but only in part, the Christian tradition has thrown up it own spontaneous corrections, and a comparison of the equally extraordinary twelfth-century figures Bernard of Clairvaux and Hildegard of Bingen is particularly instructive here. In Bernard we see a male saint asserting in a new way the importance of *feeling* in spiritual development; along with this goes a frank and even daring delight in the erotic metaphors of the *Song of Songs*: the soul is 'female' and passive before its lover; and in the iconography of St Bernard his devotion to the Virgin is celebrated as his feeding at her breast, returning, as Freudians would say, to a pre-Oedipal identification with the mother. In the connected Cistercian idea of *Christ* as mother, there is a similar turn to tenderness and passivity. Whatever one may make of this, these connected themes all indicate an unusual urge to 'relatedness'; whereas in the visions of Hildegard, Bernard's contemporary and correspondent, there is an opposite compensation towards female authority and power. Awesome female figures appear as Wisdom or 'Ecclesia'; conversely, however, the Spirit is celebrated not as submissive 'female' mediator but as a fiery (phallic) 'tower'. Yet, as Barbara Newman's brilliant analysis shows,[31] Hildegard's remarkable *sui generis* symbolism has its remaining gender paradoxes: just as Bernard's compensating themes break down at the point of accepting normal social relations with real women, so Hildegard too remains in thrall to societal assumptions about the 'weakness' and unreliability of women, whilst manifestly managing herself to be the exception that proves the rule.

To conclude: if we are to grope towards a more equitable representation of male and female creatureliness before God we shall indeed be doing a

[30] Valerie Saiving, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View' reprinted in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds.), *Womanspirit Rising* (New York, 1979) p. 37. My emphasis.

[31] Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1987).

new thing. Selective retrieval from the tradition will be instructive, but not, I suggest, wholly convincing without further critical reflection. Corrective 'androgynies' may still mask unacknowledged sexism;[32] the simple throwing up of compensating 'feminine' divine imagery may leave societal relationships between the sexes largely untouched; false apophaticism may leap to the place of 'unknowing', leaving curiously intact the sexual stereotypes it claims to overcome. The safer test for sexism overcome is not so much the purity or balance of an official doctrinal formulation, but the *practical* outworkings of the relationship between the sexes in society and Church.[33]

It has been the burden of this chapter to suggest – against the more radical of the post-Christian feminists[34] – that an 'absolute dependence' is indeed at the heart of true human creatureliness and the contemplative quest. But such *right* dependence is an elusive goal: the entanglements with themes of power, hierarchy, sexuality and death are probably inevitable but also best brought to consciousness; they are an appropriate reminder that our prayer is enfleshed. In that sense the lessons of such reflection may again be revealingly 'incarnational'.

[32] See the illuminating section in Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk* pp. 127–30.

[33] See the remarks of Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father* p. 20: 'Even when the basic assumptions of God-language appear to be non-sexist, and when language is somewhat purified of fixation upon maleness, it is damaging and implicitly compatible with sexism if it encourages detachment from the reality of the human struggle against oppression in its concrete manifestations.'

[34] See especially Mary Daly's trenchant and apposite remarks about Rom. 8 and Gal. 4 in *Pure Lust* (London 1984): 'We do not wish to be redeemed by a god, to be adopted as sons, or to have the spirit of a god's son artifically injected into our hearts, crying "father".'

Part II

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