

“Male and Female as Archic and Eucharistic Modes of Relation”

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ABSTRACT

This paper marks the tendency of Orthodox personalism, and most other forms of personalism, to ignore or deny the relevance of sex or gender to human personhood. It examines the basis for this tendency in modern personalist philosophy, ancient Greek philosophy, and ancient patristic teaching following the Alexandrian tradition. It then offers a theory of interpersonal relations based on self-giving and thanksgiving, as revealed in Holy Scripture between the Father and the Son, between Christ and the Church, and between the man and the woman. These “archic” and “eucharistic” modes of relation involve neither inequality nor subjection. On the contrary, they are the very basis of equality, freedom, diversity, and unity among persons, divine and human. Recognizing them enables us to distinguish natural human relations from economic human relations consistent with Christian tradition for a better understanding of patristic teaching on personal relations in general and male and female relations in particular.

PRESENTATION

This paper was originally proposed for yesterday’s panel on personalism, but I’m told they had so many interesting proposals on personalism, that they created this panel. I only mention this because I’m going to begin with a comment on personalism, actually a question:

Is not personalism merely a form of individualism—more humane (perhaps) than old-fashioned, rights-based individualism, but not humane enough to keep from reducing the human person to an inhuman abstraction stripped of the concrete particulars that define every human life, like sex and gender?

That has been the tendency of most personalist theory. For all its emphasis on the “essential relationality” of human persons, personalism has all but ignored the absolutely essential human relation of male and female, on which depends not only the psychological health of each human person but also the very existence of all human persons since Adam and Eve.

This tendency has deep roots in Western thinking—pre-Christian roots traceable to the ancient Greek philosophers who saw male and female as merely a bodily difference of little relevance to the sexless soul—except that the body was believed to trouble the souls of women more than the souls of men. To escape the cycle of reincarnation, women had to first become men.

Such thinking entered Christian thinking very early. The Encratites of the second century fulfilled the Apostle Paul’s prophecy (1 Timothy 4:1–3) by despising marriage and preaching an end to male and female, or at least an end to female.¹ The goal of eliminating male and female also appears in Origen, who

¹ For example, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, Peter says to Jesus, “Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of life”; Jesus answers, “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every woman who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.” *The Gospel of Thomas*, 114, 138. Translated by

consistently stressed the dissimilarity between our present bodies and our glorified bodies, so much so that at every outbreak of anti-Origenism, he was accused of denying the resurrection of the body and, with it, the survival of male and female.²

Some later Origenists did certainly believe in a sexless and even bodiless afterlife. In the unexpurgated *Kephalaia gnostika* (S₂), Evagrius Ponticus writes: “The final judgment will not show the transformation of bodies, but it will reveal their elimination.”³ And, “Just as colors, shapes, and numbers pass away together with mortal bodies, likewise matter also is eliminated together with the four elements.”⁴ All that will remain of us in the end is, he says, “naked intellect.”⁵

No later Church Father has gone that far. All have affirmed our bodily resurrection. But at least two have all but denied any meaningful survival of the distinction of male and female. The first is St. Gregory of Nyssa, whose *On the Making of Man* is best read esoterically as advancing the then-dangerous idea that man is not fully made until he has given up being male or female.⁶

The second is St. Maximus the Confessor, who seems indeed to have read *On the Making of Man* esoterically and who borrowed from it in writing his Ambiguum 41 to say plainly what St. Gregory stopped short of saying: In becoming man, Christ “drove out from nature the difference and division into male and female,” such that “instead of men and women” we are shown “properly and truly to be simply human beings.”⁷

(I should note here that while Maximus speaks of uniting the other four divisions in Ambiguum 41, he does not speak of uniting male and female; instead, he speaks rather emphatically about shaking the difference off or driving it out—a fact sometimes overlooked by Maximian scholars.)

The first modern “personalists” knew little of Maximus and probably nothing of Ambiguum 41. They were more likely to have read Gregory of Nyssa, but they were all inheritors of an age-old intellectual tradition treating male and female as a difference of little or no philosophic relevance. They were also children of the Enlightenment, on the one hand reacting against the dehumanizing tendencies of Enlightenment rationalism, materialism, collectivism, and individualism, but on the other hand faulting such isms on the basis of vague Enlightenment values such as liberty, equality, fraternity, and “uniqueness.” It is thus hardly surprising that they based their case for the value of human persons on the lowest common denominator of human personhood, sans sex.

Orthodox personalists have done much the same, but have tended to give St. Maximus the last word on the subject.⁸ Thus Christos Yannaras writes:

Thomas O. Lambdin. In *The Nag Hammadi Library: The Definitive Translation of the Gnostic Scriptures Complete in One Volume*, edited by James M. Robinson, 124–98. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990.

² See, for example, Origen’s use of Gal 3:28 in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 3.9.

³ Evagrius Ponticus, *Kephalaia Gnostika*, 2.77, 135. Translated by Ilaria L.E. Ramelli. In *Evagrius’s Kephalaia Gnostika: A New Translation of the Unreformed Text from the Syriac*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015.

⁴ Evagrius Ponticus, *Kephalaia Gnostika*, 1.29, 29.

⁵ Evagrius Ponticus, *Kephalaia Gnostika*, 1.65, 64. Also Evagrius Ponticus, *Letter to Melania* 26–30.

⁶ See Brian Patrick Mitchell, *Origen’s Revenge: The Greek and Hebrew Roots of Christian Thinking on Male and Female*, 128–32. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2021.

⁷ Maximus, *Ambiguum* 41.7, 111; *Ambiguum* 41.9, 115. Translated by Nicholas Constas. In *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, Vols. 1–2. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

⁸ Alexis Torrance and Symeon Paschalidis, eds. *Personhood in the Byzantine Christian Tradition: Early, Medieval, and Modern Perspectives*. London and New York: Routledge, 2018.

The life of the Kingdom abolishes the division of human beings into men and women ... The differentiation of the sexes does not represent an ontological distinction ... it does not relate to the *mode of existence*, the *image* of God imprinted on man. ... This is why it is done away with in the life of the last days.⁹

Likewise, Metropolitan John Zizioulas writes that persons in communion are freed from nature: “This means that a person is not subject to norms and stereotypes; a person cannot be classified in any way; a person’s uniqueness is absolute.”¹⁰ Sex, he says, is a “mechanism of death.”¹¹ Marriage and childbearing, he says, “only to supply matter for death.”¹² Human fatherhood is about “division” and “individuality,” whereas divine fatherhood is “relational and totally inconceivable in human terms, which are conditioned by individualism.” Divine fatherhood “has nothing in common with human fatherhood; no analogy between the two is possible.”¹³

There is, however, quite a lot in Orthodox tradition contradicting the key assumptions of such personalism.

First and foremost, there is quite a lot in Orthodox tradition obligating men and women to live as either men or women every day of their lives, even in prayer, when women are to dress as women and cover their heads, and men to dress as men and *not* cover their heads. That is not what we would expect if our goal were to “abolish” or “shake off” the difference of male and female.

There are also found among the Fathers other views of the image of God—views less narrow and more Scriptural than the Origenist conception of the image, which restricts it to the composition of a theoretically generic human person, viewed by itself, individually rather than in relation to other specific human persons.

St. John Chrysostom, St. Ephrem the Syrian, and Theodoret of Cyrus, saw the image of God as essentially relational, identifying it with dominion, per Gen 1:26: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion.”¹⁴ Theodoret of Cyrus also saw the image of God in man’s creativity—his building of “houses, walls, cities, harbors, ships,” he says.¹⁵ Clement of Alexandria saw the image even in man’s obedience to the commandment to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28), saying, “In this way the human being becomes the image of God, by cooperating in the creation of another human being.”¹⁶

Then there are the explicit analogies of human persons to divine Persons in Holy Scripture. First, let’s look at 1 Corinthians 11:3: “The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is the man, and the head of Christ is God.”

This verse has long been understood as a simple matter of subordination: The woman is subject to the man, as the man is subject to Christ, and as Christ is subject to God. But that’s not the only way Church Fathers understood the verse. In St. Paul’s day, his key word *kephalē*, or “head,” was rarely used mean the man in

⁹ Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 100. Translated by Elizabeth Briere. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984.

¹⁰ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 9. London: T. & T. Clark, 2006.

¹¹ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 59.

¹² Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, 47. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985.

¹³ *Communion and Otherness*, 122–3.

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Genesis 2.8*, *Homily 7 on the Statues*, and *Homily 26 on 1 Cor*; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Questions on Genesis 1.20* and *Commentary on 1 Cor 11*; Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis 1*.

¹⁵ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Questions on Genesis 1.20*. Translated by Robert C. Hill, *Theodoret of Cyrus: The Questions on the Octateuch, Vol. 1: On Genesis and Exodus*, 53–54. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007.

¹⁶ Clement, *Paed.* 2.10.83, translated by David G. Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church*, 41. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2001. Cf. Clement, *Strom.* 3.9.66.

charge. The Latin word *caput* did sometimes mean leader or chief, but the Liddell-Scott-Jones lexicon of classical Greek includes no such meaning for *kephalē*.¹⁷ The Greeks, after all, had many other words for that purpose.

Prior to the Christian era, the word *kephalē* more often meant “beginning” or “source.”¹⁸ The Septuagint, for example, uses *kephalē* interchangeably with *archē* (“beginning”) to translate the Hebrew word *rōsh*, meaning both “head” and “beginning,” as in *Rōsh Hashanah* (“head of the year”), also in the “heads” or “headwaters” of the rivers bounding the garden of Eden in Genesis 2:10, and also in the phrase “head of the corner” or cornerstone in Ps 117:22. The Septuagint’s Isaiah 9:15 even uses *archē* to explain *kephalē* in the preceding verse.¹⁹ Lampe’s Patristic Greek lexicon provides examples of Church Fathers also using *archē* and *kephalē* interchangeably and likewise referring to Christ as the “head of creation.”²⁰

So while Clement of Alexandria understood *kephalē* in 1 Cor 11 to mean “ruling power,” St. Cyril of Alexandria understood it to mean “archetypal beauty” and thus the source of shared being.²¹ Theodoret of Cyrus also understood it to mean “source” and even used 1 Cor 11 to argue for the divinity of the Son based on the Father being the source of the Son.²² This is also the sense of *kephalē* in Col 1:18, Col 2:19, and Eph 4:15, which speak of Christ as the “head” or source of the Church.

So 1 Cor 11:3 says the man is the source of the woman as the Father is the source of the Son, and this is consistent with Gen 2, which the Apostle Paul references in 1 Cor 11:8–9, saying, “For the man is not of the woman, but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman, but the woman for the man.” Amazingly, it is also consistent with modern science, which tells us that the man, and only the man, contains both X and Y chromosomes, and that it is his contribution of an X or a Y that determines the sex of the child. So a man actually is, biologically, the source of every woman.

But what does it mean to be the source of someone or to owe one’s source to someone? What difference does it make in how one relates to another?

The safest and easiest way to answer that question is to look at what is said in the Gospels about how the Father and the Son relate to each other. Too often theologians pondering the mystery of male and female have taken what they think they know about men and women and looked for the same in the Godhead—and tended thereby to project male and female on God in ways Church Fathers would never allow. The safer way is to take what we are told about the Father and the Son in the Gospels and then look for the same in men and women.

Many things are said in the Gospels about the Father and the Son, but one difference stands out: In the Gospels, between the Father and the Son, all of the giving is done by the Father and all the thanking is done

¹⁷ Liddell, H.G., R. Scott, H.S. Jones, and R. McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 945. Oxford: Clarendon, 1940.

¹⁸ For a fuller analysis of the uses of *kephalē*, see Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of the Word *Kephale* (‘Head’) A Response to Recent Studies.” In *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and Wayne Grudem, 425–68. Wheaton, IL: Good News, 1991. See also Stephen Bedale, “The Meaning of *kephalē* in the Pauline Epistles,” *JTS* 5.2 (October 1954) 211–15. Bedale (213) writes, “If this virtual equation of *κεφαλή* and *ἀρχή* be conceded a new and illuminating interpretation of several Pauline passages becomes possible.” The last chapter of *Origen’s Revenge* offers just that.

¹⁹ Is 9:14–15: “So the Lord took away from Israel the head and tail [*kephalēn kai ouran*], great and small, in one day; the old man, and them that respect persons, this is the head [*archē*], and the prophet teaching unlawful things, he is the tail [*oura*].” Translation by Lancelot C.L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with the Apocrypha: Greek and English*, 844–845. London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1851.

²⁰ G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 749. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.

²¹ Clement, *Strom.* 4.8, 420. Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:3*, PG 74, 879–82.

²² Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 11*, PG 82, 309–14.

by the Son. Not once is the Father said to thank the Son, and not once is the Son said to give anything to the Father *except thanks*. This defines their relationship for us better than anything else: As the *Archē* of the Son, the Father gives to the Son all that He has, even His very being; the Son in return gives thanks to the Father, showing His thanks by doing the Father’s will.²³

So we have a relationship based on self-giving by an archic “head” and thanksgiving by a eucharistic “body.” And where do we find this said of the man and the woman? Ephesians 5, where the Apostle Paul once again draws an analogy from the man and the woman, this time to Christ and the Church: The husband is to give his life for his wife as Christ gave His life for the Church, and the wife is to serve her husband as the Church serves Christ.

This is not, however, the only human relationship mirroring the self-giving and thanksgiving of the Father and Son, as the same can be said of many other head-and-body relationships: parents and children, clergy and laity, princes and people, and even military commanders and their troops (and I say that as an ex-paratrooper). All of these head-and-body relationships are elevated in Christian understanding above mere subjections, wherein the will of one prevails over the will of others, and above mere hierarchies, wherein heads and bodies are unequal, the head being always in some way superior. All of these head-and-body relationships are ideally devoid of subjection and hierarchy on account of a unity of will and essential equality, as found in the Trinity. When I say “ideally,” I mean that none of these relationships actually requires inferiority or disagreement; they can still exist when all are equal and in complete agreement, theoretically and in some cases actually, as between parents and their adult children.

The sixth-century writer known as Dionysius the Areopagite himself exempts the Persons of the Trinity from hierarchical relation, and in doing so he provides us a model for unions of distinct yet equal persons who share the same nature equally on account of one being the source of others, yet who relate to one another in distinct ways. He cannot call such a union a hierarchy because inequality is inherent in his definition of hierarchy. We also cannot call it a *hierarchy* without confusion, but we can call it an *archy* on account of one person serving as the self-giving *archē* of another.

Human archies do, of course, often exist also as hierarchies and subjections on account of the Fall, which destroyed our original unity with God and each other. This is because, with our many wills, the only way we can be brought back into true unity—the only way, as Our Lord prays, “that they may be one even as we are one” (John 17:22)—is for some persons to submit to other persons. And this is thus decreed by God for our own good. Thus, in preaching on 1 Corinthians 11, St. John Chrysostom says:

And from the beginning He made one sovereignty only, setting the man over the woman. But after our race ran headlong into extreme disorder, He appointed other sovereignties also, those of Masters, and those of Governors, and this too for love’s sake.²⁴

Subjection is therefore a temporary truss God uses to bind up what has been torn apart by the original sin of an-archy, when the man and the woman turned away from their archic sources to follow a rebellious creature instead of their Creator.

²³ The identification of the Father as the *Archē* of the Son and Holy Spirit was common among Church Fathers. For example, St. Gregory Palamas writes, “The Father is called Father only in relation to His Son. In relation to both the Son and Spirit, He is called *Archē*, even as He is called *Archē* in relation to the creation.” Gregory Palamas, *Chapter 132*, PG 150, 1213B–C. For many more examples, see Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, 235.

²⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homily 34 on 1 Cor.* In *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Vol. 12*, 205. Edited by Talbot W. Chambers. Christian Literature, 1889.

Yet, despite all such lawful, economic subjections, archy is still our goal, the *telos* toward which we are all to strive. It is not such an impossible ideal for many married couples, who achieve in their years together a largely *archical* relationship, based on love, trust, and a life as one. In such relationships, the language of command, "Do as I say," gives way to the language of accord, "Let's do this," echoing God's own manner of speaking in Genesis 1:26: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

This is not how many Westerners think today because most Westerners have been taught to think not by the Apostles and Saints but by Rousseau and Marx and many others who have despised humility, resented inequality, viewed others as enemies, condemned subjection itself as tyranny, and taken offense at being cast in the role of the Son—as the one to give thanks by humbly submitting and obeying.

Truly, if Rousseau and Marx are our apostles, then we are in the wrong religion, because the Church of Christ has always taught humble acceptance of both our subjection to others and our *archic* and *eucharistic* responsibilities to others.

For much more on those responsibilities, I would urge you all to read the last chapter of my book, *Origen's Revenge: The Greek and Hebrew Roots of Christian Thinking on Male and Female*.

Thank you.

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