

# Creation & Covenant

The Significance of Sexual Difference  
in the Moral Theology of Marriage



Christopher C. Roberts



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MORAL THEOLOGY OF MARRIAGE**

**CHRISTOPHER CHENAULT ROBERTS**



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# ABBREVIATIONS

AC = *Alexandrian Christianity: Selected Translations of Clement and Origen with Introductions and Notes*. Edited by Henry Chadwick and John Ernest Leonard Oulton. London: SCM Press, 1954.

ANF = *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by A. Roberts and J. Donaldson. 1885–1887. 10 vols. Repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.

NPNF2 = *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*. Edited by P. Schaff and H. Wace. 1890–1900. 14 vols. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995.

NRSV = New Revised Standard Version of the Bible

SCC = *Sermones super Cantica Canticorum*

SCG = *Summa contra Gentiles*

ST = *Summa Theologiae*

Regarding works by Augustine: Translators differ about the titles of Augustine's works. *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, for instance, is often either *Commentary on Genesis against the Manichaeans* or *On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees*. To avoid confusion, I use full Latin titles on first reference (as listed in the SBL handbook) and Latin abbreviations afterward. The abbreviations are the standard scholarly ones as listed in *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*. Edited by Patrick H. Alexander, John F. Kutsko, James D. Ernest, Shirley A. Decker-Lucke, and David L. Petersen. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999.

Regarding works by Luther, since I cite a single, standard English series of Luther's works, I use the English titles from that series.

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# INTRODUCTION

Is sexual difference theologically significant? Specifically, when speaking about the ethics of marriage, does sexual difference matter? When the Christian tradition has claimed that the two parties in a marriage should be sexually differentiated—that is, a male and a female—what is at stake? What makes sexual difference morally significant? This book addresses these questions by studying the history of the moral theology of marriage in primarily Western Christianity.

In recent years, several branches of Christianity have been debating the question of same-sex marriage, and this debate lies in the background to this book. Nevertheless, the questions of this book are more basic than this debate. One can ask about the significance of sexual difference without having questions of homosexuality in mind. Therefore, in most chapters, this book will ignore the debate, allowing historical sources to speak on their own terms and pursuing sexual difference as a topic in its own right. Yet the debate about same-sex marriage helps explain why this book is timely and important, and I will discuss this debate in chapter 8 and in the conclusion. Therefore a few introductory observations about this debate are appropriate.

The ongoing debates about homosexual marriage can be framed and understood in a variety of ways. One way is to understand them as debates about whether churches can or should sanction marriage without sexual difference. In other words, the contemporary debates at least implicitly ask whether the difference between male and female matters for marriage, and if so, how and why. Are there theological reasons

that oblige the churches to the traditional understanding of marriage, in which the sexual difference of husband and wife is a *sine qua non*? Or is marriage a more flexible covenant, which any two people can keep and for which sexual difference is indifferent? Such questions can lead to further questions, including: Why has the tradition believed that sexual difference was a necessary component for a marriage to exist and actually be a marriage? Are there sound and persuasive theological reasons for these beliefs, or are they merely deeply held but unfounded assumptions, theoretically open to modification? Might the logic of Christian marriage imply that existence as male or female is in some way a vocation, a summons to a particular way of life that builds upon sexual difference, a call to which we are in some way accountable, or is sexual difference something Christians can treat relatively indifferently, freeing us for more important matters?

Surprisingly few Christians seem to ask these questions explicitly in the current debates. Instead, for instance, some conservative Christians think that certain passages from Leviticus or Romans end the discussion. These passages can be cited and deployed legalistically against those who would propose something like gay or sexually indifferent marriage. But these scriptures, while condemning homosexuality, do not straightforwardly answer this book's questions about sexual difference. Mere opposition to same-sex marriage is not the same thing as a positive theological and evangelical account of sexual difference, no matter how great the weight of Scripture or tradition may be. Similarly, some conservatives also appeal to the role of procreation for marriage. But in such instances, one still needs to give a reason why marriage must be procreative. Why should marriage have any necessary relationship to biological procreativity and thus to sexual difference? Why would one claim that the potential fecundity of sexual difference is morally significant? To insist on sexual difference in marriage will cause many people discomfort, for their initial desires at least appear not to be sexually differentiated. Thus explicit reasons need to be offered: Why should these people accept a limitation on their desires? What is significant about sexual difference that makes it a constraint worth enduring, even when it is not easy? Those who would make conservative appeals to traditional moral law must address these questions, lest their law appear arbitrary and detached from the gospel. Any account of the significance of sexual difference must be profound enough to speak to the deepest levels of human personhood, explaining why it matters so much. What significance must sexual difference have if it is to lead to a definition of marriage that will cause some people to embark on a long and difficult ascetical struggle?

Meanwhile, many liberal Christians tend to emphasize acceptance, autonomy, and pastoral experience in their explanation of why same-sex marriages should be embraced by the church. Yet this language is a retreat from the categories of theological anthropology and from Christianity's historic confessions about marriage and celibacy. For instance, in the Anglican communion, the Eames Commission recently asked the U.S. Episcopal Church to explain its liberal views on homosexuality. Afterward, a member of the commission noted that "given the chance to make their case, Episcopal Church leaders argued on secular, human rights and social justice grounds."<sup>1</sup> Rhetorically and conceptually, such language is bound to fail to persuade those who realize, on the basis of worshiping the Christian God, the need to seek a theological logic for their claims. By definition, the language of liberalism fails to engage on common terms with the communion of saints and the lordship of Christ. Arguments about sexuality that dispense with theological logic and that are premised on human autonomy and experience are incongruous in debates within the churches, even when glossed with appeals to justice or love, for such liberal arguments suggest that we can know ourselves sufficiently apart from revelation and doctrine, as if there were parts of life removed from God's grace, address, vocation, command, judgment, or teleology.

This book is an attempt to move beyond both left and right, and toward a higher standard of theological conversation. Even when we will be studying famous theologians, in this book it would seem that we are bound to examine familiar material in an unfamiliar way, since all too few people have taken the trouble to subject this classic material to these pressing questions.

Furthermore, while the conclusions of this book should inform the debate about homosexuality, this book also asks questions that are more general and deeper than that debate has tended to encourage. In an essay commenting on the St. Andrew's Day Statement,<sup>2</sup> which itself was an attempt to put the ecclesiastical conversation about homosexuality on a less partisan and more transparently theological basis, Oliver O'Donovan noted that "the task of the theologian is not simply to engage in the debate on the side that appears to have the greater right; it is to safeguard the Gospel integrity of the debate, by clarifying what the questions are that must be at issue."<sup>3</sup> This book is in sympathy with that description of the theological task. In asking questions about the significance of sexual difference, and in searching among historic theologians on marriage for answers, the theologian's foremost task is not to retrieve ammunition for today's combatants. Instead, this research investigates whether

certain monumental theologians in the history of theology of marriage have anything to say that might reveal a meaning or significance, or an insignificance, for sexual difference. Only then, when one has looked at the tradition in its own right and from a more disinterested perspective, can one return to the present debates. Only then can this book hope to offer resources and better questions for the present.

There are other reasons for sustained and patient engagement with the tradition and, at least at the outset, not reading it through the lenses of today's anxiety. We could frustrate ourselves were we to dig too insistently for answers to questions that might not have been asked by previous generations; we are anachronistic if we fault them for failing to respond to our own era's challenges. The possibility that earlier generations might not have asked and answered our questions in ways that satisfy us means that, in principle, we have to be prepared for this research to have "negative results." There may not be straightforward answers to our questions. We will want to guard against overtheorizing and drawing conclusions that are too grand for the original material to bear. We therefore must try to stay close to the primary sources and be prepared to meet arguments that have perhaps an awkward relationship to the questions we are ultimately asking. After all, in earlier eras, apparently no one was contesting the question of sexual difference as is happening today; in theology, it often requires a debate before a doctrine is clarified and defined.

However, if we were to find only partial answers to our questions, or if we were to learn that our material is not sufficient for answering our questions, then such results would still be useful. Such results might imply that today's confusion arises at least partially because Christianity has only recently had occasion to develop explicit and systematic answers to our questions, in which case we will have some sympathy for why the church is not unanimous today. We will then understand a little more clearly that, to the extent that the tradition does have answers, the church today might be assimilating what has only recently been heard and understood. The extent of the originality of today's theological predicament will then be clearer. Equally, of course, neither should we discount the possibility that the tradition has well-developed and precise arguments about today's questions which we should hear readily and directly. Perhaps the tradition has already encountered our questions, answered them well, and the church needs to repent of its amnesia.

It is not only partisans in today's homosexuality debates who should be interested in this research. Anyone interested in a complete Christian theology of marriage should want to know about the significance of sexual difference. If we can become more articulate about the relationship

between various theological doctrines, moral practices concerning sexuality, and sexual difference, then it stands to reason that the church's profession and witness will be more coherent.

Moreover, feminists of all varieties, in and out of the church, have reasons for being interested in questions of sexual difference. As Linda Woodhead recently concluded, "What is needed, it seems, is fresh and creative reflection on the mystery of human sexual difference which is as responsibly related to the Christian tradition as it is to contemporary concerns."<sup>4</sup> Feminist theory helps raise the question of what it means to be sexed, and a history of why classic theologies of marriage have thought that sexual differences matter (or not) has a role in that discussion.

Once one has asked theologically about sexual difference, there are many possible ways of proceeding. Biblical scholars have exegeted key passages in Genesis, the Pauline corpus, and elsewhere in order to gather material for today's debates about sex and gender.<sup>5</sup> One could also approach the significance of sexual difference through the question of who is eligible for ordination to holy orders,<sup>6</sup> or by examining the issue of inclusive language in theological discourse.<sup>7</sup> In a painstaking project, Prudence Allen has completed two volumes in a projected multivolume quasi-encyclopedic attempt to compare and contrast dozens of individual philosophical and theological anthropologies of sexual difference, from the pre-Socratic philosophers to the present.<sup>8</sup> Featuring prominently in Allen's project and elsewhere are technical discussions of Aristotelian or Thomistic metaphysics and biology, and what they imply for sexual difference.<sup>9</sup> Allen and other substantial historical studies have also scrutinized some of the classic theological anthropologies of the past for evidence of proposed hierarchy, complementarity, or equivalence between the sexes.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars who attempt to account for sexual difference by means of more systematic (as opposed to historical) theological anthropology include Hans Urs von Balthasar<sup>11</sup> and, more recently, Gavin D'Costa.<sup>12</sup> Some theologians have also proposed original christological approaches to sexual difference, asking, for instance, about the implications of the ascension: What might it mean that Jesus' embodied (and hence male) particularity is affirmed at precisely that moment when such a corpus would seem to have the least earthly utility, and what might that indicate about the eschatological significance of the bodies and sexual differences for those who follow him in the resurrection?<sup>13</sup> One could also study a particular theologian known for being significant with respect to issues of anthropology and embodiment, such as Irenaeus,<sup>14</sup> or one might study church policies and councils, such as the Council of Gangra in the fourth century, where matters of marriage and asceticism were debated

with particular thoroughness.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary philosopher Luce Irigaray has famously framed questions of sexual difference with respect to feminism and the history of Western philosophy, employing a post-Christian quasi-Roman Catholic rhetoric in the process.<sup>16</sup> Irigaray's work contends that the history of Western discourse about sex is compromised because its interlocutors are forced to use grammar and modes of rationality that inevitably articulate the world from a male point of view and hence inevitably obscure the true difference between the sexes.

Faced with such an overwhelming and complex field of potential inquiry—and there are certainly many other approaches that could be proposed—this book must, on its own, be insufficient to its ambitions. One book cannot finally separate the overlapping strands of this complex subject, and yet any final answers to our questions must engage on all of these fronts. Thus one book cannot do everything that needs to be done.

However, I offer this defense for the approach of this book: I have chosen to study the significance of sexual difference in the moral theology about marriage. This classic literature on marriage is a worthy topic in its own right among the many possible inquiries into sexual difference, and, although it might not be finally sufficient, it is at least a necessary element in any comprehensive deliberation on the topic. Moreover, since it is to some extent the present discussion about the possibility of gay and lesbian marriages that prompts our questions about sexual difference, it is logical to begin seeking answers by reviewing prior traditions of moral theology about marriage. Do these traditions offer explicit or implicit arguments about sexual difference? Before deconstructing their authors' perspectival influences, or before quarreling with their biblical hermeneutics, or before proposing exotic solutions to the various problems the tradition appears to have bequeathed, it would seem prudent to make sure we have identified and understood the arguments that the tradition actually makes or presupposes, and to do so on terms that are not alien or anachronistic to that tradition.

It is also worth acknowledging that often in theological history, discussions of marriage have occurred in relation to discussions of celibacy. For that reason, from time to time and fairly often, our argument must be generous in what it understands to be the moral theology about marriage. The significance of sexual difference with respect to celibacy will need to be considered, since marriage and celibacy were often discussed as interlocking and mutually reinforcing vocations.

By focusing on sexual difference, this book is not emphasizing what some might term "gender difference." The distinction between "sex" and "gender" is arguable and subtle, but commonly scholars use "gender"

to refer to the “psycho-social-cultural characteristics” that can exist or be constructed in light of the biological differences between male and female.<sup>17</sup> If one accepts the distinction, concepts such as “masculinity” or “femininity” refer to gender, but “male” and “female” refer to sex. It might be helpful, then, to say that to the extent the sex-gender distinction is possible and sustainable, this book will prioritize sex. What sexual difference means and why it matters is the subject of this book, and that generates a closely associated but nevertheless distinct agenda from the questions of gender studies. The significance of gender in marriage is a valid and overlapping research project, but it is subtly different. For instance, asking whether it is appropriate to define certain roles in marriage as masculine or feminine is not the same as asking why it might matter that there are two sexes at all. Asking how one sex might or might not have dominated and defined the place of the other sex is not the same as asking whether the phenomenon of two sexes should have significance. My point is simply to say that in this book I will usually, but not always, concentrate on whether and how the biological difference between male and female has or has not mattered in moral theology about marriage. I will usually, but not always, focus on sex and not gender. One can easily imagine a project on similar questions that reverses this priority, but that is not my present intention.

This book is organized chronologically. The first chapter surveys five patristic theologians and shows that the early Christian tradition was somewhat inchoate about the significance of sexual difference. In their theologies of marriage and celibacy, these five theologians only rarely addressed questions of sexual difference. To learn what they believed, one often has to make inferences, or scrutinize comments that were made as mere asides or rhetorical flourishes. However, to the extent one can discern their beliefs, they seem to contradict one another, with incompatible views about the status of sexual difference.

However, as we will see in chapter 2, these disagreements resolve into a more coherent position with Augustine. Augustine, as is evident from both explicit and implicit arguments, believed that sexual difference is an ontologically significant feature of humanity in every era of theological history, from creation to eschaton. For Augustine, sexual difference derives its significance in the first instance by enabling procreative marriage, which is necessary for populating the heavenly city and thus fulfilling God’s purposes in history. But the significance of sexual difference appears to go beyond marriage and procreation for Augustine. His argument, often rooted in anti-Manichaean polemics, commits him to the goodness of embodied, material life, and that leads him to suggest

that sexual difference will be adapted to some new use in heaven, in the eschatological era when marriage is obsolete.

The next three chapters—on Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, and the Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin—show continuity with Augustine. Bernard's sermons on the Song of Songs are premised on Augustine's framework, as Bernard relies on the basic goodness of sexual difference in marriage as privileged material for allegories of God's love. Aquinas recapitulates Augustine to an extent, but his assimilation of Aristotelian biology leads him to relate sexual difference, procreation, and celibacy in ways that depart from Augustine. This departure is perhaps trivial initially, but it will matter in the modern period, and it needs to be noted at its source. The Reformers, while apparently emphasizing marriage at the expense of celibacy, argue that sexual difference is a fundamental aspect of being human, regardless of whether one is married or not. For Luther especially, to be a man or a woman is to be confronted with the question whether and when one will marry; Luther's way of describing this question, as a basic precondition for obedient life under God, has the effect of connecting sexual difference to the life of the church.

By the end of these first five chapters, it seems that while the classic theologies of marriage in Western theology have not offered lengthy, explicit, and sustained treatments of sexual difference, they have nevertheless raised the issue from time to time, suggesting a certain consensus. This consensus believes that sexual difference ought to be treated as morally significant. From Augustine to the Reformation, there was a consensus that God created human beings in sexual differentiation, that Christian social life will affirm this difference through marriage and the regulation of erotic life, and that sexual difference will be redeemed in the eschaton.

The rest of the book—three more chapters and a conclusion—studies several theologians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Two chapters focus on Karl Barth and John Paul II, respectively, whose arguments about sexual difference seek to deepen and clarify the traditional premise that sexual difference has moral significance. The last chapter reviews three contemporary theologians—Graham Ward, Eugene Rogers, and David Matzko McCarthy—who argue in various ways that sexual difference is morally insignificant. Finally, in the conclusion, I review and consolidate the arguments from each chapter of the book.

We will see that the revisionist theologians of today—like their counterparts at the beginning of the Christian era—do not subscribe to the traditional view of the significance of sexual difference. However, there

is at least one difference between the early and the contemporary heterogeneity of belief. Today it is possible to juxtapose arguments for the insignificance of sexual difference with traditional, post-Augustinian claims for its significance. This juxtaposition enables us to ask whether the contemporary revisionists adequately respond to these arguments, to see why questions about sexual difference are important, and to pose fresh questions. I shall conclude that the revisionists have not adequately understood or responded to the post-Augustinian consensus that links sexual difference to the purposefulness of God's creation. In other words, the standard of argument must be higher before the revisionist case can claim to have succeeded; the revisionists must engage points they have left hitherto untouched. The pre-Augustinian theologians could not be held accountable to what subsequent tradition believed and argued, but the contemporary revisionists can be. The contemporary revisionists claim to be responding to the likes of Barth and John Paul II, and yet, especially on those points where Barth and John Paul II bring the post-Augustinian consensus to light, the revisionists appear to misread or misunderstand their twentieth-century interlocutors.

The lacunae in the revisionist case are not necessarily culpable faults, for the kinds of questions this book will put to the tradition are rarely asked. The tradition itself has perhaps not been as explicit as it might have been about its beliefs and arguments, not least because these arguments were not previously contested. The number of times I must speak of "inference" or "presupposition" in the early chapters will be testimony to this phenomenon. The originality of the first seven chapters consists partially in bringing to light what might have been obscure in whatever the tradition might have thought or implied about sexual difference, as well as achieving clarity about what the tradition does not say. We might want therefore to moderate our frustration with contemporary theologians who do not engage ideas that have not been as accessible as we might want them to be.

What I claim, nevertheless, is that once the historical recovery has been made, the inadequacies of the revisionist case are newly visible. To make this claim is not to damn the authors or their motives, or to make final pastoral responses for a church in pain or disarray, or to say everything that needs to be said about the theological significance of sexual difference. It is simply to say that the tradition has better arguments and richer ideas than the revisionists have perhaps realized, and that recovering these resources enables us to speak coherently and faithfully today and thus to set the theological context for subsequent discussions.

## Notes

1. William Sachs, “Anglican Disunion: The Global Response to a Gay Bishop,” *Christian Century*, November 16, 2004, 8.

2. See Michael Banner et al., “St. Andrew’s Day Statement: An Examination of the Theological Principles Affecting the Homosexuality Debate,” in *The Way Forward? Christian Voices on Homosexuality and the Church* (ed. Timothy Bradshaw; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997), 5–11.

3. Oliver O’Donovan, “Homosexuality in the Church: Can There Be a Fruitful Theological Debate?” in *The Way Forward?* 22.

4. Linda Woodhead, “Woman/Femininity,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (ed. Adrian Hastings et al.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 757.

5. Recent examples include Francis Watson, *Agape, Eros, Gender: Towards a Pauline Sexual Ethic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Douglas A. Campbell, ed., *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003).

6. See, e.g., A. M. Allchin et al., *A Fearful Symmetry? The Complementarity of Men and Women in Ministry* (London: SPCK, 1992). Also see the Hans Urs von Balthasar references in note 11, below.

7. See, e.g., Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 170; and Alan Torrance, “‘Call No Man Father!’ The Trinity, Patriarchy and God-Talk,” in *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ* (ed. Douglas A. Campbell; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003), 179–97.

8. Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B.C.–A.D. 1250*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997); and *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 2, *The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

9. See Michael Nolan, “What Aquinas Never Said about Women,” *First Things*, no. 87 (1998) for a position challenging Allen.

10. Other examples include Kari Elisabeth Boerresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Women in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas* (trans. Charles H. Talbot; Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981); and Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study in Sexual Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

11. See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (vol. 2 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*; trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 365–82. See also Balthasar, “Women Priests?” in *New Elucidations* (trans. Mary Theresilde Skerry; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986),

187–98. For a discussion profoundly influenced by von Balthasar, see David L. Schindler, “Catholic Theology, Gender, and the Future of Western Civilization,” in *Heart of the World, Center of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 237–74. Agneta Sutton compares von Balthasar’s theology of sexual difference to Barth’s and John Paul II’s in “The Complementarity of the Two Sexes: Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and John Paul II,” *New Blackfriars* 87, no. 1010 (2006): 418–33.

12. Gavin D’Costa, *Sexing the Trinity: Gender, Culture, and the Divine* (London: SCM Press, 2000).

13. Steve Holmes and Sandra Fach have raised versions of this question with me in seminars and informal conversation. Fach suggests that Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 13n47, might be opening possibilities along these lines.

14. John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 220, argues that Irenaeus had an anthropology of “the fullness of our created, fleshly, sexual being.”

15. The Council of Gangra documents may be found in *NPNF2*, vol. 14.

16. Among Irigaray’s many works are *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill; London: Athlone, 1993), and *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (trans. Gillian C. Gill; New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

17. Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 2:15–16.

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## Chapter 1

# FIVE EARLY THEOLOGIANS

In this chapter we will study Tatian, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, and Jerome. Besides these five theologians, there are, of course, other early patristic theologians who wrote about marriage, celibacy, and sexual difference. But these five theologians arguably had more influence on subsequent tradition than their other contemporaries, and, in any case, five theologians is a sufficient sample for establishing that in the earliest stages of the church's theological reflection there was no consensus about the theological significance of sexual difference. Is sexual difference a biological epiphenomenon, something that should be transcended en route to an angelic-like existence, or is sexual difference “integral to God's vision for His creation, and as such . . . an enduring feature of ourselves”?<sup>1</sup> Often the theologians of this era have little or nothing to say in response to this question. In other instances, they do have something to say, but, as we shall see, the diversity of their beliefs indicates a collective inchoateness in early Christianity about sexual difference.

### Tatian

Tatian has virtually nothing to say about the theological significance of sexual difference in the sources that still exist today, although a few inferences can be made.

Although he was excommunicated in Rome in 172, Tatian continued to be respected in the Christian East. Part of Tatian's ambiguous legacy means that he is sometimes suspected of having held gnostic attitudes toward God, creation, the human body, and asceticism. Indeed, judging

from the brief quotations surviving in Tatian's foes, it would appear that he was either an actual gnostic such as Valentinus or a supposed gnostic such as Marcion.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes his foes cited the fact that Tatian's followers, known as Encratites, insisted on sexual continence (and dietary restraints) for all the baptized at all times; to these critics, Encratic asceticism suggested that Tatian must have been teaching unorthodox attitudes toward sex and the body.

However, as Henry Chadwick notes, "there is all too little evidence of the details of the heretical doctrines he came to hold."<sup>3</sup> We can even say that when we examine Tatian through his only treatise to survive in its entirety, *Oratio ad Graecos*, a picture emerges that reveals nongnostic foundations for his extreme asceticism. Listening to this text, it would appear that Tatian's thought is more complex than simple denunciations of his alleged Gnosticism would allow. Nevertheless, even when we listen carefully and draw out a more rounded portrait of Tatian's asceticism, we still learn little about sexual difference.

In *Oratio*, Tatian professes that "the construction of the world is excellent"<sup>4</sup> and that there is but one God, the sole creator of all that is, and who, as Spirit, is utterly distinct from all created matter.<sup>5</sup> In saying these things, he makes no appeal to any intermediary aeons or demiurges, and says much else that disavows characteristic gnostic explanations. The oration offers an anthropology and a doctrine of creation in which the constitution of a human being is both flesh and soul, a combination like a temple in which God can dwell.<sup>6</sup> For Tatian it is possible to "descend" through the flesh to the level of wild beasts (excelling them in "articulate language only"), but the fault lies not in the intrinsic nature of flesh but in free will influenced by passions.<sup>7</sup> What we long for, Tatian maintains, is not an escape from creation, which would be standard gnostic longing, but a restoration of its pristine state.<sup>8</sup> Eschatologically, Tatian confesses a "resurrection of bodies after the consummation of all things."<sup>9</sup> But nowhere in this basic but orthodox doctrine of the created body do we find an extended treatment of sexual difference.

Tatian also counsels Christians to "despise all worldly things," including and perhaps especially sexual intercourse.<sup>10</sup> But this counsel is probably best regarded as a rhetorical exhortation to love God above all other things, or to shape the human will so that it is "superior to the passions,"<sup>11</sup> which would distinguish it from the conventional gnostic disdain for creation itself. For example, Tatian declares that Aphrodite "finds joy in the bonds of marriage,"<sup>12</sup> and so we should avoid marriage because we want to love the true God and avoid giving succor to Aphrodite.<sup>13</sup> That is not the attitude of a gnostic denigrating a material phenomenon, such