

Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage

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In Review



Creation and Covenant: The Significance of Sexual Difference in the Moral Theology of Marriage

Christopher C. Roberts

In their debates over homosexuality, denominations tend to assume that the “orthodox” people will be antigay and that advocates for inclusion are eager to toss out anything older than, say, 1968. This is why the emergence of a generation of orthodox pro-gay theologians is so important. If James Alison, Sarah Coakley, Eugene Rogers, Mark Jordan, David Matzko McCarthy and others are right, then those making orthodox doctrinal claims ought to lead in welcoming gays and lesbians rather than excluding them.

Even so, Christopher Roberts takes such theologians on. His book *Creation and Covenant* is without a whiff of homophobia, yet he takes issue with “revisionist” efforts to rework church teaching on the necessity of gender difference for marriage. The bulk of the book is an exploration of the theological significance of gender difference in celibacy and marriage from the church’s earliest days to now. Figures like Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Pope John Paul II and Karl Barth get their own chapters. Then Roberts takes on three of his revisionist antagonists—Rogers, McCarthy and Graham Ward. Though the book was once a dissertation at the University of London, it has a clear and compelling style befitting a former journalist.

The jaunt through church history is yeoman’s work, noteworthy only because Roberts stops to fuss at critical reappraisals of Gregory of Nyssa. Since recent readers of Gregory have taken him to be more fluid on gender than traditionally thought, Roberts takes issue with them, but does so too quickly and unconvincingly. The historical discussions lead inexorably to the concluding chapter, “Three Proposals for the Insignificance of Sexual Difference.” But do Rogers, McCarthy and Ward really think sexual difference insignificant? Or do they simply think that sexual difference is significant in different ways than Roberts and much of Christian tradition do?

For Ward, an originator of the Radical Orthodoxy movement who shares with Roberts a love for Karl Barth, sexual difference is merely a rhetorical trope. Its importance in biblical stories such as Genesis and the Song of Songs means it can’t be ignored, but difference there is meant to signal the Trinity’s difference from and erotic desire for creation, not how we must marry. Ward accuses Barth of reverting to natural, biological conceptions of theology—as unforgivable a sin as any in the Barthian worldview. Ward contends that couples who come forward for the church’s blessing

should be treated as human, not male and female.

Rogers, author of *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (1999), also theologically minimizes sexual difference. A professor of Christian thought at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Rogers accuses Barth of an ecclesiological failing, charging him with reducing the church's importance to salvation by locating the image of God in the union of male and female. We do not approach God as individuals, Rogers argues; we do so as church, "where two or three are gathered." For Rogers, sex draws us out of our individualistic and sinful selves and into the divine delight of the Trinity. That it most often takes place between males and females is less important than its role in sanctification. Gender distinctions are fluid for Rogers, who argues that the key aspects of the *imago dei* in us are not sexed. He also banks on Aquinas's claim about celibacy: just as only some of us are called to marry and bear offspring and others are not, he contends, some who are married will not have biological children but will bear fruit in other ways.

Roberts's best criticism is directed at Ward, whom he accuses of being like the early Augustine—more Platonist than Christian. Radical Orthodoxy has this problem generally, and Ward's blithe dismissal of gender difference seems especially vulnerable to the charge. Roberts's attack on Rogers is less convincing. His argument that "sexual difference is the first and primary arena of the *imago*" is based on Genesis 3 and traditional readings of gender. Perhaps it is the Platonist in me also, but early Christians would also have located the *imago* in human reason, by which God appeals to our minds, not just our bodies. For Roberts, we do not stop being animal, male and female, in our salvation; the covenant does not render creation insignificant, arbitrary or obsolete. Gender difference is "unmissable" in creation, he argues; it is normatively expressed in celibacy or heterosexual marriage, and it is endangered only by the rise of Gnosticism.

These are serious charges with which Roberts's opponents will have to wrestle. For now we can say that Roberts occasionally patronizes when he lectures "revisionists" on "tradition." They are well aware that they are going in a new direction. What's of interest is that they do so with some (though of course not all) traditional elements intact. Roberts rightly notes the general confusion over gender in our culture but oddly laments that the "debates created by the revisionist theologies" make it impossible for the church to speak clearly on the matter. Gays and lesbians and their allies don't perceive themselves as starting this fight, and it does Roberts no credit to point the finger. He chastises Rogers especially for elevating the importance of

same-sex desire given that, until the eschaton, desire can be misleading. Roberts suggests that such “precious feelings” indicate an impatience for the eschaton and essentially tells Rogers to get over it.

These rhetorical missteps aside, Roberts has taken his opponents seriously and has mostly treated them charitably. One hopes that the favor will be returned in kind. On no topic is precise theological deliberation more necessary than on this one, and more difficult to find.