

The Complementarity and Symbolism of the Two Sexes: Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar and John Paul II

Agneta Sutton

I. Introduction

Comparing Karl Barth's, Hans Urs von Balthasar's and John Paul II's understandings of humankind's dual existence as man and woman is not without interest. This is not only because Balthasar was a Barth scholar and John Paul II an admirer of Balthasar, but also because the anthropologies of all three were largely shaped by their understandings of the man-woman relationship. The focus in this paper is not primarily on their views on the man-woman relationship in marriage, procreation or parenthood. Instead it is on their views on mankind's very gender differentiation. There are major similarities between their views here.

None of the three sees the dual creation of human beings as man and woman as serving only a biological purpose. All three put their emphasis on the symbolical dimension of the sexual differentiation between man and woman. They all share the view that man and woman are fundamentally different and complementary in more than a bodily sense, and that man and woman are complementary precisely in their difference. And none of them allows for non-sexual, bisexual or androgynous humans from an anthropological standpoint. All three espouse a relational and trinitarian understanding of God and find human likeness to God in our relational nature. They see our very creation as man and woman as a representation of our relational nature in the image of God.

However, while all three maintain that man and woman are equal in dignity, John Paul II has a more egalitarian understanding of the relationship between man and woman than either Barth or Balthasar. While Barth speaks of the subordination of woman and Balthasar talks of male primacy, such language is quite foreign to John Paul II, a man of a different generation from either of them. Barth, however, differs from both Balthasar and John Paul II inasmuch as, unlike them, he is loath to specify either male or female characteristics—although he insists on the priority of man as initiator and leader. The denominational difference between Barth, Calvinist, on the one hand,

and the Roman Catholic Balthasar and John Paul II, on the other, comes to the fore in Balthasar's and John Paul II's espousal of a Marian ideal of womanhood. The latter two therefore, highlight as feminine certain qualities that they perceive in Mary as the model woman. These are the same as the characteristics they find with reference to the Ephesian analogy. By contrast, Barth's discussion of the Letter to Ephesians, and so of the Church's bridal relation to Christ, puts all the emphasis on the relationship as such rather than on the characteristics of the individual parties.

II. In the image of *Deus triunus*

As a covenant partner of God, the human being is called to 'express himself as the image of God, *Deus triunus*', says Barth.¹ On his understanding, it is not so much as separate individuals, but as individuals in relationship, that man and woman resemble the triune God and so also reflect the covenant of grace, Christ's covenant relationship with the Church. Because human beings are created to be God's covenant partners, they are relational beings. And, as relational beings, we are called to fulfil ourselves by affirming the other. Only so can we reflect the triune nature of God. Not alone but in fellowship, then, do we express our relational nature, in the image of *Deus triunus* and His covenant relationship with mankind as realised in Jahweh's covenant with Israel and, above all, in Christ's relationship with the Church. According to Barth, 'the first and typical sphere of fellow-humanity is that between male and female'.²

The command of God comes to man and woman in the relationship and order in which God created them together as His image, as the likeness of His covenant of grace, in the male and female existence which they gain in His eyes within their character as the likeness and image.³

In line with tradition and with reference to Ephesians 5:32, Barth understands marriage as the main mystery and sign witnessing to the divine covenant with mankind, because it is 'the type' of the relationship between 'the Husband Christ and His Bride the Church. But while he sees marriage as the archetypal relationship in the image of the triune God and His covenant, he views man and woman as complementary in all spheres of life'.⁴

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III, 4, ed., G W Bromiley and T F Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), p. 117. Henceforth abbreviated as CD III.4.

² *Ibid.*

³ Barth, CD III.4, p. 153.

⁴ Barth, a Calvinist, does, of course, not accept the Roman Catholic and Orthodox views of marriage as a sacrament or sign on a par with baptism and mediating grace. For Barth, marriage is 'simply and genuinely creaturely'. See, CD III.4, pp. 124–125.

Balthasar, equally, emphasises our relational nature. He describes the man-woman relationship as the 'paradigm of the community dimension which characterises man's entire nature'.⁵ With reference to Barth, he points to the Ephesian analogy, arguing that the existence of man and woman as symbolical of the relationship between God and humankind shows that the man-woman relationship in marriage is not designed only, or primarily, for procreation, but for a love that reflects that between Christ and Church:

Karl Barth has insisted that Genesis 2 'speaks of man and wife in their relationship as such', that is, not of 'human fatherhood and motherhood, nor of the founding of the family, which is a central concern in the rest of the Old Testament.' . . . This is important for Barth as a pointer to the fulfilling relationship between Christ and Church . . .⁶

That on Balthasar's understanding, as on Barth's, there is a trinitarian dimension to the symbolism of the man-woman relationship is clear. This comes to the fore, for example, when he tells us that it is the Spirit of the triune God who awakens love in the Church, His Bride, 'who in Grace calls out come'.⁷ Thus the God in whose image man and woman are made and whom they are to reflect in their relationship, especially within marriage, is the triune God.

John Paul II takes a similar line on humankind's likeness to God. He too speaks of the symbolism of man and woman as relational beings. Thus he says that man and woman 'can exist only as a unity of the two, and therefore in relation to another human person'; and that this relational nature of the human being, there from the time of creation, 'is the prelude to the divine self-revelation of the triune God'.⁸ Like Barth and Balthasar, he argues, then, that it is above all in their togetherness that man and woman resemble the triune God and reflect Christ's relationship with the Church:

God, who allows Himself to be known by human beings through Christ, is the unity of the trinity: Unity in communion. In this way light is also thrown on man's image and likeness to God, spoken of in the Book of Genesis. The fact that man 'created as man and woman' is the image of God means not only that each one of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created in a 'unity of the two' in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in that way mirror in the world the communion of

⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory II: Dramatis Personae: Man in God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1976), p. 365. Henceforth abbreviated as TD II.

⁶ Balthasar, TD II, pp. 381–382.

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1963), p. 77.

⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1988), p. 22. Henceforth abbreviated as MD.

love that is in God, through which the three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the divine life.⁹

Thus while allowing, with reference to Ephesians 5, that it is above all marriage that reflects the inner trinitarian life of God and so also Christ's relationship with the Church,¹⁰ John Paul II, like both Barth and Balthasar, sees the togetherness of man and woman in their very gender differentiation—the mere 'fact that man created as man and woman, is the image of God'—as a reflection of the triune being of God.¹¹

III. Complementary difference

Barth calls the difference between man and woman 'structural and functional'.¹² He has no time for the Jungian view that the mental make-up of all human beings is partly male and partly female. He insists that each one of us is either male or female and that this dual human existence entails both 'difference and affinity'.¹³ Understanding complementarity to imply incompleteness, he says that man is not complete without woman; and woman is not complete without man. It is this very incompleteness, as part and parcel of our relational nature, which he sees as symbolical of God's love for mankind. Referring to Genesis 2, he writes:

Man would not be complete without the creation and co-existence of this 'helpmate [woman]' and 'he can only be an I through and for this Thou' . . . Thus man in his divinely created sexuality is a similitude of the covenant, which rests upon the fact that God Himself does not will to be alone but with man and for him . . .¹⁴

Seeking the difference between man and women in a mutual orientation of the one towards the other, Barth finds it, then, in the incompleteness of the one without the other, in the fact that there could be no 'such a thing as a self-contained and self-sufficient male life or female life'.¹⁵ In all spheres of life 'man is directed to woman

⁹ John Paul II, MD, pp. 22–23.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), p. 312. Henceforth abbreviated as ToB.

¹¹ This understanding of human relationships indicates an understanding of God not unlike that of Colin Gunton or John Zizioulas. Gunton writes: '. . . it is this point—that the being of God lies in the relation of persons—that is so important for us. The contemporary Greek theologian, John Zizioulas, has elaborated something of its meaning: "In God the particular is ontologically ultimate . . . In trying to identify a particular thing we have to make it part of a relationship, and not isolate it as an individual". See Colin E Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), pp. 95–96.

¹² Barth, CD III.4, p. 117

¹³ Barth, CD III.4, p. 120.

¹⁴ Barth, CD III.4, p. 149.

¹⁵ Barth, CD III.4, p. 163.

and woman to man'.¹⁶ It is their mutual orientation towards one another, and so their relationship, which defines their very maleness and femaleness. 'This mutual orientation constitutes the being of each. It is always in relation to their opposite that man and woman are what they are in themselves', says Barth.¹⁷

Thus on Barth's account, there is no need to specify male and female characteristics. Indeed, he denies the possibility of making statements such as: 'Thou shalt follow thy reason and thou thy instinct' or 'Thou shalt be objective and thou subjective'.¹⁸ For he holds that what we may see as typically feminine or masculine characteristics tend to be socially conditioned, that is, culturally relative. 'Different ages, peoples and cultures have had very different ideas of what is concretely appropriate, salutary and necessary in man and woman as such', he says.¹⁹ This is while also insisting, as shown below, that the man-woman relationship is not strictly symmetrical.

Like Barth, Balthasar, takes Genesis 2 as a starting point for his discussion of the difference between man and woman and complementarity. The reference in the story to woman as man's helpmate points to the complementarity of man and woman and to an understanding of woman as man's 'counterimage',²⁰ he observes. This, he argues, is evident in the light of Adam's failure to communicate with the animals which he encountered before woman and which he was asked to name and rule over.²¹ Only woman in her difference and yet shared humanity is a suitable companion for man. Laying great stress, then, on the sexual differentiation between man and woman, he describes man and woman as a 'dual unity' of 'two distinct but inseparable realities, each fulfilling the other'.²²

He will not accept any other form of sexuality than heterosexuality and, on his account, one is either man or woman. Thus he argues that the first and the second accounts of creation must not be separated in such a way that that the first is viewed as speaking of 'an as yet sexually undifferentiated (or androgynous) man, with the implication that it is only in the second account that the very real Eve arrives'.²³ On Balthasar's understanding, as on Barth's, there is no such thing as an a-sexual human. Eve was always there next to man.

Turning from Eve to Mary, Balthasar finds in her the ideal woman. He sees Mary's response to God as quintessentially feminine.

¹⁶ Barth, CD III.4, p. 163.

¹⁷ Barth, CD III.4, p. 163.

¹⁸ Barth, CD III.4, p. 153.

¹⁹ Barth, CD III.4, p. 154.

²⁰ Balthasar, TD II, p. 365.

²¹ Balthasar, TD II, p. 365.

²² Balthasar, TD II, pp. 365–366.

²³ Balthasar, TD II, p. 370.

This is at the same time as he sees her response as the kind of response that is expected of all Christians in relation to God. She 'as the handmaid (Lk 1:38), as the lowly servant (Lk 1:48), and thus as the paradigm of loving faith that accepts all things (Lk 1:45, 11:28)) and looks to him in reverent modesty, submissive before him (Eph 5:24, 33; 1 Co 3:18)', is the model woman showing mankind how to relate to God, he writes.²⁴ It is clear that if Mary is the model woman and her response is seen as typically feminine, then her responsiveness and submissiveness must be understood not only as typically feminine qualities but as ideal female qualities.

And yet Tina Beattie surely has a point when, with reference to Balthasar, she observes that, if the proper human response—both male and female—to God is feminine in relation to Him, then 'this account of sexual complementarity entails not the affirmation but the eradication of genuine difference'.²⁵ In other words, if the proper response to God is like that of Mary, then both man and woman must display characteristics of that response, such as receptiveness and submission.

Only by putting an emphasis on our embodied nature can Balthasar uphold the distinction between femininity and masculinity. It comes as no surprise, then, that he underlines that the union and communion between man and woman—like all personal communion—is one that is mediated by the body. On his account it is only because man and woman as embodied creatures share the same human nature that they communicate with one another spiritually as well as carnally. Likewise it is as embodied creatures that they complement one another. Their relationship is neither purely spiritual nor purely carnal, but one in which 'bodily things are communicated spiritually and spiritual things bodily'.²⁶ Thus insisting that woman is man's counterimage, he refutes the idea of a middle-sex, claiming that: 'The male body is male throughout, right down to each cell of which it consists, and the female body is utterly female; and this is also true of their whole empirical experience and ego-consciousness'.²⁷

Given his esteem of Balthasar, it is noteworthy that John Paul II also attaches a great importance to the body. It should be added that Barth too emphasises that we are psychosomatic creatures, as is shown below in respect of his understanding of fornication as a kind of denial of our psychosomatic wholeness. To return to John Paul II, he argues that 'man and woman constitute two different ways

²⁴ Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, pp. 77–78.

²⁵ Tina Beattie, 'A Man and Three Women. Hans, Adrienne, Mary and Luce', *New Blackfriars* Vol. 79, No. 927 (1998), pp. 97–105.

²⁶ Balthasar, TD II, p. 366.

²⁷ Balthasar, TD II, p. 365.

of the human “being in the body” in the unity of the image’.²⁸ This is because of their ‘identity of human nature’ coupled with their ‘duality’ constituted by ‘the masculinity and femininity of created man’.²⁹ He stresses, then, that it is as a bodily creature that ‘man becomes the image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion’.³⁰ Hence, the very difference between the male and female body is a pointer to a male-female complementarity that cannot be reduced to procreation. For it is through the body that we communicate; the ‘body reveals the living soul’.³¹ In other words, the human body is ‘not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation’, but ‘it includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift—and by means of this gift—fulfils the meaning of his being and existence’.³² Thus because of their ‘reciprocal complementarity’,³³ man and woman as carnal creatures are called from the very beginning not just to procreate and ‘not only to exist together, but they are also called to exist mutually one for the other’.³⁴

IV. Asymmetry but equality

Barth, as a Calvinist, takes the male-female mutuality particularly seriously inasmuch as he insists that men and women ought never to be permanently separated. And so he has no time for male and female religious orders in which the sexes are separated. He associates such separation with homosexuality, which he denounces as a ‘physical, psychological and social sickness’ as well as idolatry and so as disobedience to God.³⁵ Indeed, for him homosexuality is a kind of ‘self-satisfaction’ because it is a failure to recognise the mutual complementarity and inter-dependence of the sexes. On his understanding, ‘man can only be genuinely human with woman’ and ‘woman with man’.³⁶ Thus ‘the divine decision that it is not good for man to be alone has to be taken irrevocably; and it applies to woman as well as to man’.³⁷ Man and woman stand and fall together.

This, on Barth’s understanding, is at the same time as man and woman stand, as he calls it, in sequence.³⁸ He sees the relationship

²⁸ John Paul II, ToB, p. 58.

²⁹ John Paul II, ToB, p. 45.

³⁰ John Paul II, ToB, p. 46.

³¹ John Paul II, ToB, p. 61.

³² John Paul II, ToB, p. 63.

³³ John Paul II, ToB, p. 58.

³⁴ John Paul II, MD, p. 24.

³⁵ Barth, CD III.4, p. 166.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Barth, CD III.4, p. 168.

³⁸ Barth, CD III.4, p. 169.

between man and woman not only as one of mutual dependence, but also as asymmetrical. 'He is ordered, related and directed to her very differently from what she is to him',³⁹ he writes. Speaking of 'super- and sub-ordination',⁴⁰ he argues that woman is subordinated to man. Man is called to take the lead as 'inspirer, leader and initiator'. This is, however, with a certain qualification: man must do so in humility as a 'service in the common cause of humanity'.⁴¹ For both man and woman are called to accept their position out of respect for God.⁴² Man, like woman, must show humility before God. But these qualifications do little to dispel the impression of the idea of male superiority.

Thus with reference to Ephesians 5, Barth argues both that man and woman are primarily subject to the Lord and that woman is called to subordination in relation to man, just as the Church is in relation to Christ, since the man-woman relationship is in the image of that between Christ and Church. And by subordinating herself to man, woman becomes a model for man to follow in his relationship with the Lord. 'She is the prototype of the community in its obedience to Jesus Christ', he writes.⁴³ Even without the Marian model, Barth, then, arrives at much the same conclusion as Balthasar does, taking Mary as model woman and model for the human—both male and female—response to God. Noting that this actually makes woman in some sense primary, Barth argues that it explains the 'exhortation to mutual subordination in Eph 5:21, which precedes the injunction in Eph 5:22 to wives to submit themselves to their husbands or regard them as they regard the Lord. And it explains, on his understanding, why, despite the primacy of man, man and woman are equal in dignity and right before God'.⁴⁴ However, after noting the point about mutual subordination, he immediately adds that this does not 'cancel the concrete subordination of woman to man, which is the whole point of the text'.⁴⁵ So surely, on his understanding there is no real equality.

Barth insists that man as the leader is supposed to uphold the proper order in the relationship between man and woman. This is 'his masculine responsibility'.⁴⁶ The 'strong man' accepts this responsibility and the 'mature woman' encourages him to do so. And she does so without jealousy or envy but feeling 'promoted and protected'.⁴⁷ She does so appealing to man's kindness, says Barth, who

³⁹ Barth, CD III.4, p. 164.

⁴⁰ Barth, CD III.4, p. 169.

⁴¹ Barth, CD III.4, p. 170.

⁴² Barth, CD III.4, p. 172.

⁴³ Barth, CD III.4, p. 175.

⁴⁴ Barth, CD III.4, p. 169.

⁴⁵ Barth, CD III.4, p. 175.

⁴⁶ Barth, CD III.4, p. 176.

⁴⁷ Barth, CD III.4, p. 177.

thus argues that woman is man's educator and someone who is not only subordinated to him but who 'stands by his side'.⁴⁸ One senses a tension here. Barth seems to want say that woman is man's equal and yet subordinated to him.

The same tension is evident in the thought of Balthasar, who, like Barth, accords primacy to man. According to Balthasar, the second story of creation, in Genesis 2, 'implies three things: first a primacy of the man'—originally alone with God; secondly, that his 'loneliness is not good'; and thirdly that 'woman comes from man' and that it is through woman that man is given fulfilment.⁴⁹ Woman, then, is man's answer to his quest for a companion. The primacy of man is clear. Yet, with reference to 1 Cor. 11:8–12, Balthasar insists on equality between the sexes, saying 'the man's (persisting) priority is located within an equality of man and woman'.⁵⁰ This is because, just as woman is for man, so man is for woman. But, if as he argues, the meaning of the 'dual existence' of man and woman is only fully revealed by the Ephesian 'archetypal image of Christ/Church',⁵¹ and so with the Lordship of Christ over the Church, then the subjection of woman to man, perceived as implied by the analogy between the two relationships, is hard to square with woman's equality with man.

However, ultimately Balthasar is not so much concerned with the question of equality as with the nature of the relationship between man and woman. In this regard he is close to Barth. What is important for him is man's leadership. And this must surely be a spiritual leadership. For the mutual orientation and dependence that reigns between man and woman must be spiritual insofar as it is in the likeness of Christ's relationship with the Church. This is underlined by Balthasar's own observation that Barth had shown that the analogy between the two relationships (that between Christ and Church, and that between man and woman) drives a wedge between the procreative end of the man-woman duality and relationship and, on the other hand, their personal union, that is, between biological and spiritual union. On Barth's account, while procreation was central to the Old Testament, Genesis 2 was an exception insofar as it actually speaks of personal union. He also argues that, with Christ's coming the requirement to procreate is relativised and spiritual fruitfulness is prioritised. Thus Balthasar writes that the Christ-Church analogy makes a distinction between 'the fruitful encounter between man and woman in personal mutual self-giving—and, on the other side,

⁴⁸ Barth, CD III.4, p. 181.

⁴⁹ Balthasar, TD II, p. 373. As noted above, however, there are other times when he speaks of their mutual fulfilment.

⁵⁰ Balthasar, TD II, p. 373.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

their sexual union'.⁵² Only with the coming of Christ, then, is the symbolism of mankind's creation as man and woman fully revealed.

This brings out a second point of note in Balthasar's argument: the symbolism of their duality, while not a-sexual, has now, with the coming of Christ, become 'suprasexual':

The reciprocal fruitfulness of man and woman is surpassed by the ultimate priority of the "Second Adam", who, in suprasexual fruitfulness, brings a "companion", the Church into being. Now the 'deep sleep' of death on the Cross, the 'taking of the rib' in the wound that opens the heart of Jesus, no longer takes place in unconsciousness and passivity, as in the case of the First Adam, but in the consciously affirmed love-death of the Agape, from which the Eucharist's fruitfulness also springs. The relative priority of the man over the woman here becomes absolute, insofar as the Church is a creation of Christ himself, drawn from his own substance' . . . The suprasexual (and not sexless) relationship between the incarnate Word and his Church is a genuinely human one; human beings can be enabled to participate in it.⁵³

In the 'suprasexual' man-woman relationship Agape becomes primary, and so 'man is enabled to transcend the sexual—a function specific to earthly existence'.⁵⁴ The man-woman relationship, while in a sense remaining nuptial, is here of a spiritual kind marked by Agape.⁵⁵

By contrast to Barth and Balthasar, John Paul II's understanding of the Ephesian analogy (or analogies) is markedly more egalitarian. With reference to the head-body analogy, he explains that we should think of husband and wife as an organic unity.⁵⁶ Thus when the husband is seen as the head and the wife as the body, just as Christ is said to be the head of the Church, this analogy should not be taken to imply male superiority or be seen as a call for one-sided subjection on the part of the wife or woman.⁵⁷ It should be understood only as a manner of describing their wholeness. Moreover, John Paul II is quite adamant that when it is said that wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord, this does not mean that husbands should lord over their wives.

In fact we read: Wives be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord'. In saying this, the author does not intend to say that the husband is the lord of the wife and that the interpersonal pact proper to marriage is a pact of domination of the husband over the wife.⁵⁸

⁵² Balthasar, TD II, p. 381.

⁵³ Balthasar, TD II, p. 413.

⁵⁴ Balthasar, TD II, p. 414.

⁵⁵ Balthasar may here have had in mind his own (sexless) relationship with Adrienne von Speyr, whom he regarded as his *alter ego*.

⁵⁶ John Paul II, ToB, p. 315.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, ToB, pp. 309–311.

⁵⁸ John Paul II, ToB, p. 310.

Thus, he argues, like Barth, that husband and wife both are subject to the Lord.⁵⁹ Yet unlike both Barth and Balthasar, he does not also insist on female subordination but on mutual subordination.

The community or unity which they should establish through marriage is constituted by a reciprocal donation of self, which is also a mutual subjection, which, being reciprocal 'out of reverence for Christ', confers on the conjugal union a profound and mature character.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, for John Paul II, as for Barth and Balthasar, since Christ is the lover and the Church His bride, it is woman, the bride, who stands for the way in which all Christians should relate to Christ. In this way 'being the bride' and thus the 'feminine' element becomes the symbol of all that is 'human', he says.⁶¹ But if he is to insist on male-female equality, should he not confine the Christ-Church analogy—inasmuch as it implies primacy and lordship on the part of Christ—to the human being's relationship with God? Only if he sees subordination as characteristic of the human relation to God—rather than also as a characteristic of the wife's relationship with her husband—can he maintain that he sees the man-woman relationship as one between equals. However, when he recalls that Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1: 31–37) responded with 'full submission of intellect and will, manifesting the obedience of faith' and therefore responded 'with all her human and feminine I',⁶² it sounds as if he sees obedience and thus submission as a particularly feminine response. This hints at a tension in his thought not unlike that found in the thought of both Barth and Balthasar.

That there is such a tension is also strongly suggested when John Paul II compares Mary's obedience to that of Abraham. When saying that 'Mary's obedience of faith, during the whole of her pilgrimage, will show surprising similarities to the faith of Abraham',⁶³ he surely casts doubt on his own classification of Mary's response as typically feminine, and even on the view that woman is a better representative than man of the kind of attitude all humans should have to God.

Despite his insistence—in the light of his interpretation of Ephesians 5—on mutual subjection, his understanding of male-female polarity at the same time suggests a kind of asymmetry. This comes to the fore yet again when he writes in *Mulieris Dignitatem*: 'Christ is the Bridegroom. This expresses the truth about the love of God who "first loved us" (cf. 1 Jn 4:19)'.⁶⁴ By analogy, man loves and

⁵⁹ John Paul II, ToB, pp. 304–344; MD, pp. 9–103.

⁶⁰ John Paul II, ToB, p. 310.

⁶¹ John Paul II, ToB, p. 94.

⁶² John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Mater* (Sherbrook, Quebec: Editions Paulines, 1987), p. 24. Henceforth abbreviated as RM.

⁶³ John Paul II, RM, p. 26.

⁶⁴ John Paul II, MD, p. 95.

woman is loved. He writes in the *Theology of the Body*: ‘the husband is, above all, he who loves and the wife, on the other hand, is she who is loved’.⁶⁵ This calls to mind Barth’s and Balthasar’s claims about male primacy, although John Paul II will have nothing to do with the idea that woman is in any way second or subordinate to man. That John Paul II’s view of womanhood suggests that the relationship between man and woman is asymmetrical is also reflected in his discussions of Eve. Speaking of Eve as God created her in the beginning, John Paul II says that she was the loved one and Adam the one who loved.

The calling of woman into existence at man’s side as a ‘helper fit for him’ (Gn 2:18) in the ‘unity of the two’ provides the visible world of creatures with particular conditions so that ‘the love of God may be poured into the hearts’ of the beings created in His image. The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: it is she who receives love, in order to love in return.⁶⁶

While the man’s love does not imply that the woman is an altogether passive partner, since she is called to respond to him, there nevertheless seems to be an order within the relationship. The primacy of initiative seems to be ascribed to man. Yet it should be noted that John Paul II puts a greater emphasis on reciprocity in the man-woman relationship of love and marriage than does either Barth or Balthasar. This, as is argued below, is especially evident in his understanding of male domination as the symptom of a disordered man-woman relationship.

The emphasis on reciprocity is also paramount in John Paul II’s interpretation of the Song of Songs. Analysing the Song of Songs, he comments on the fact that the groom calls the beloved his sister. He argues that the expression ‘sister’ speaks both of their common human origin and of their difference, which ‘allows them to live their mutual closeness in security’.⁶⁷ He speaks of peace between them and of a ‘reciprocal and disinterested gift’,⁶⁸ which seems to imply that they see each other as equals not only in origin but also in status.⁶⁹ Thus even if there an asymmetry in the man-woman relationship on John Paul II’s account of man as ‘he who loves’ and of woman as ‘she who is loved’, this asymmetry is attenuated by his emphasis on reciprocity within the relationship.

⁶⁵ John Paul II, ToB, p. 320.

⁶⁶ John Paul II, MD, p. 106.

⁶⁷ John Paul II, ToB, p. 371.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

V. Normative Implications

On Barth's understanding, and also on Balthasar's and John Paul II's, the sexual difference between man and woman has normative implications. These implications relate not only to sexual relations in the physical sense. They relate to the man-woman encounter outside of marriage as well as within. Within marriage they relate to sexual activity as a part of the relationship—and sexual activity, all three hold, should be confined to marriage. As Barth, puts it, what is in question is 'the whole man and not merely the use which he makes or does not make of his physical sexual organs'.⁷⁰

Thus, Barth writes: 'The sexual relation should be integrated into the total encounter of man and woman'.⁷¹ This is because the sexual relationship between man and woman 'is only a dimension and component of the whole encounter of man and woman, alongside it there exist in greater or lesser proximity others which are all of them psycho-physical in character, exactly as may be affirmed of the sexual relationship'.⁷² In other words, we are both carnal and spiritual creatures.

Emphasising that sexual activity should be confined to marriage, Barth argues, with reference to 1 Cor. 6, that by fornicating the human being denies his/her truly relational nature in the image of the triune God. On his understanding, 'the Pauline argument depends upon the realisation that a merely bodily or physical and therefore partial and transient relationship of man and woman, such as fornication essentially is, is here represented as utterly impossible'.⁷³ That is, as psychosomatic beings we cannot separate sex from other aspects of ourselves. Giving oneself in the body should involve total self-giving. At least this is how it should be in the case of Christians, whose covenant relationship with God should be reflected in human relationships. 'Just as he himself wholly and as a whole is in communion with the Lord, only he himself and as a whole can have intercourse with a woman'.⁷⁴ Hence, he must avoid fornication, since 'in such contacts he cannot be wholly himself', writes Barth.⁷⁵ Fornication, as partial self-giving, fails to reflect the divine covenant with mankind as realised in Christ's relationship with His Church. Sex belongs within marriage, because only marriage can involve total self-giving. On Barth's understanding, sex without total self-giving is an expression of 'self-centredness and bondage to self which merely exploits that

⁷⁰ Barth, CD III.4, p. 130.

⁷¹ Barth, CD III.4, p. 132.

⁷² Barth, CD III.4, p. 133.

⁷³ Barth, CD III.4, p. 135.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

natural impulse, detaching it from the psycho-physical unity of natural love and using it in the service of self-preoccupation or a flight from self'.⁷⁶ Because we are relational and union-seeking beings—in the image of the triune God and His relationship with mankind through Christ's relationship with the Church—love, on Barth's view, involves commitment, permanence and exclusiveness, which means marriage.⁷⁷

Also among the normative implications of our relationship with God, a relationship that reflects both divine love and our dependence, is the requirement that we should be 'genuinely and fully the one or the other, male or female', says Barth.⁷⁸

'That God created man as male and woman as female, and therefore as His image and likeness of the covenant of grace, of the relationship between Himself and His people, between Christ and His community, is something which can never lead to a neutral It . . .'⁷⁹

In no way should we seek to evade our sexuality. We should not do so either by aspiring to be either sexless or by seeking to be like the other sex. Barth denounces males who seek to be feminine or females who seek to be masculine. In particular, Barth dismisses 'feminists' who want 'to occupy the position of men or fulfil the function of men'.⁸⁰ Men and women must no more seek to 'exchange their true vocations' than they must seek to overcome or go 'beyond' their sexuality.⁸¹ Barth condemns all aspirations to go 'beyond' bi-polar sexuality to 'a third and supposedly higher mode of being, possible to both sexes and indifferent to both', be it a middle-sex, a sex-less neuter or a bi-sexual mode of being.⁸² To his mind, such aspirations are perverse, as is the practice of homosexuality.

Balthasar takes a similar view. On his understanding, as on that of Barth, there is no such thing as an a-sexual human. Insisting on humankind's duality and complementarity, as man and woman, he rejects both bisexuality and homosexuality. On his account, however much we strive, it is not even possible to be a middle-sex or exist as a sexless neuter. It is vain to seek a sexless existence—although man and woman may transcend their sexuality in the sense of entering into suprasexual relationships characterised predominately by agape, rather than eros.

According to Balthasar, the male is and always remains male and as such occupies a place of persisting priority. His interpretation of

⁷⁶ Barth, CD III.4, p. 137.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Barth, CD III.4, p. 149.

⁷⁹ Barth, CD III.4, p. 158.

⁸⁰ Barth, CD III.4, p. 155.

⁸¹ Barth, CD III.4, p. 154.

⁸² Barth, CD III.4, p. 156.

the Ephesian analogy and his Marian model of femininity imply that the role of woman is to respond to man who calls the tune. Hers should be 'the response of the "Bride", who in grace calls out, "Come!" (Rev 22:17) and "let it be to me according to your word" (Lk 1:38)'.⁸³ But as John Paul II observes, the feminine characteristics singled out belong to both man and women in their proper relationship to God.

This said, John Paul II's vision of femininity resembles that of Balthasar insofar as it suggests asymmetry in the male-female relationship, although he is appreciably more sympathetic to the situation of woman and has an appreciably more egalitarian view of the relationship. While praising woman's sensitivity and receptiveness or openness to others, he argues that these characteristics can make her vulnerable to abuse. Thus he suggests that man has a tendency to respond to woman's gift of self, not with a reciprocal total gift of self but with domination. And he describes male domination as a 'break of the original peace within the male-female encounter'; that is, he sees male domination as a 'constant threat precisely in regard to this unity of the two which corresponds to the dignity of the image and likeness of God in both of them'.⁸⁴ On his account, male domination is not a characteristic of the relationship as it should be, but of a disordered man-woman relationship. Male 'domination indicates the disturbance and loss of the stability and that fundamental equality which the man and the woman possess in the unity of the two'.⁸⁵ While this constitutes a threat to the woman and is an insult to woman's dignity, it also adversely affects the man, John Paul II argues. Thus he says that not only is this an insult to the dignity of the woman, but by offending against woman, man offends against his own human dignity and spoils the relationship.⁸⁶ On this understanding, what is called for is a mutual respect of the one person for the other and a mutual recognition of the other as an equal. Only insofar as men and women recognise and accept both their difference and their equality can they live in harmony, says John Paul II.

Thus while he strongly objects to the 'masculinisation' of woman, he insists, more convincingly than either Barth or Balthasar, on her dignity and equality with man.⁸⁷ And, no doubt, it is because of his more sensitive and sympathetic understanding of woman, that he insists that women must understand that their fulfilment as persons, their dignity and vocation, is to express their very own particular image and likeness of God,⁸⁸ an image which to his mind is Marian

⁸³ Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible*, p. 77.

⁸⁴ John Paul II, MD, p. 36.

⁸⁵ John Paul II, MD, p. 37.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ John Paul II, MD, p. 29.

⁸⁸ John Paul II, MD, p. 59.

and maternal,⁸⁹ wherefore he identifies the ‘genius of woman’ as ‘sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance’.⁹⁰ If this view of woman has laid him open to a charge of sentimentality, it also entitles him to gratitude on the part of women, whose cause he has fought in so many of his letters and encyclicals.

VI. Conclusion

What emerges from a comparison of Barth, Balthasar and John Paul II is a fundamental similarity inasmuch as all three theologians have a trinitarian understanding of the symbolism of humankind’s dual creation as man and woman. While there are tensions in their understandings of the man-woman polarity, they are all three agreed that on a Christian and trinitarian understanding, man and woman are not created as humans of two different sexes primarily with a view to procreation, but rather for a companionship that reflects the relational and loving nature of the triune God in whose image they are created in their unity and duality.

As to the tensions in Barth’s writings these surface when he speaks of woman both as second to man and as standing at his side. In Balthasar’s writings we find a similar ambiguity insofar as he claims that man is primary at the same time as he insists that woman is man’s equal in dignity. Moreover, in Balthasar’s thought we find a female ideal one of whose main characteristics is submissiveness and a male ideal characterised by leadership. While John Paul II shares Balthasar’s ideal of womanhood, by contrast to both Barth and Balthasar, he puts a greater emphasis on reciprocity and sees the relationship between man and woman as distorted if man seeks to dominate.

There is thus a greater emphasis on woman’s equality with man in the writings of John Paul II than in either Barth or Balthasar, even if fundamentally there is no difference between the three theologians in regard to their understandings of the trinitarian symbolism of the creation of man and woman in the image of God.

*Dr Agneta Sutton
Department of Theology
University of Chichester
PO 19 6PE*

Email:amsutton@amsutton.fsnet.co.uk

⁸⁹ John Paul II often speaks of Mary’s spiritual motherhood as a model for women—as well as for the Church. See for example, *Redemptoris Mater*, pp. 77–81.

⁹⁰ John Paul II, MD, p. 112.