

The Mythology of Begetting and Sex in the Church Fathers' Writings

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If we follow Matthew's Gospel 1, 1–16, it seems that the 'genealogy of Jesus Christ' is extremely clear: son of David, son of Abraham, who fathered Isaac . . . Right up to Jacob, who 'fathered Joseph, the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, called the Christ'. Luke 3, 23–8, which echoes Matthew, introduces a first discrepancy: after an exceptional 'when Jesus began his work he was about 30', he says he was 'the son, as people thought, of Joseph'. This 'as people thought' casts doubt on the whole of the following genealogy, even though it goes back still further, as far as 'Adam, son of God': the 'hiatus' is clearly the 'virgin birth', 'when I have no husband', as Luke writes in 1, 34. So the very idea of descent, and with it the notion of sex associated with procreation, appears to be questioned at the very moment it is being stated. Far from being a paradox that only we moderns can see, the difficulty did not go unnoticed by many Fathers of the Church. The sole aim of what follows is to describe some of the responses attempted during Christianity's early centuries in order to patch over this break with classical rules of descent.

When Tertullian, in the *De carne Christi*, XXIII, mentions¹ Luke's 'sign of contradiction' (*signum contradicibile*, in Luke 2, 34) in relation to 'Mary's bosom' (*uterum Mariae*), he is aware of all the mockery that the idea of Mary both virgin and not virgin might inspire. In advance he argues against those who might be tempted to invoke an apocryphal text by Ezekiel, in which there is mention of a 'cow who gives birth without giving birth', by issuing a threat: 'Rather fear the Holy Spirit wished to damn you with those words when he saw you discussing Mary's bosom' (XXIII, 6). Furthermore, he assumes the sign of contradiction and even makes it the core of the Church. Considering the successive moves that led from Suzanne's bosom to the Church's, from adultery to the Virgin and from her to the Bride as the very principle of Holy Mother Church, it is important to read Tertullian carefully:

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So we recognize as a sign of contradiction the Virgin Mary's conception and childbearing, which makes all those Academy hangers-on say: 'The virgin who isn't one gave birth without giving birth.' As if those words – if we agree they had to be said – would not support our case rather than theirs. Yes, she did give birth, and from her own flesh; no, she did not give birth, because she did not receive a man's seed. Yes, she is a virgin: in her husband's eyes; no, she is not a virgin, because she gave birth. But I have no use for your reasons: whether the woman who gave birth did not give birth because she did not do so from her flesh, or the woman who is a not virgin is not a virgin because she is not the mother of the fruit of her womb.

And as a climax: 'With us nothing is dubious, nothing is tortuous, nothing allows us to maintain both pros and cons: light is light, darkness darkness; yes is yes, no is no' (*De carne Christi*, xxiii). Nothing is dubious but everything is contradictory. In addition to the baby Jesus, the Virgin brought forth the spirit of contradiction. And that same spirit of contradiction allowed the Fathers, the 'mother rock', to bring forth the Church, or their Mother, by a well-known geological, mineral process, since antiquity had imagined 'stones that procreate', as Roger Caillois was pleased to acknowledge.

Tertullian, a great scholar of the ancients and their mythology, must have been aware of the risk that the 'sign of contradiction' he cherished might also become a 'sign of confusion'. No less learned than he was in matters of genealogy, not to say gynaecology, Gregory of Nyssa, another Church Father, and one of the most subtle, had become equally obsessed with 'illicit unions' and 'the reversal of every natural order'² (*Treatise on virginity*, III, 10). In his *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, on the subject of Lot's incest with his daughters, he is in fact concerned about the sacrilege originating from certain births: 'How did the mothers of a sacrilegious birth become sisters to their own children? How did the children have the same man as father and grandfather?' (III, 6). The Scriptures had thought of the first birth but had not imagined the descendants. The Church's entry into the 'world' must have particularly disturbed their sense of genealogy. But it is true that their typological reading of the Bible and the ancients had given them the solution: what had gone before was sometimes a prefiguring, sometimes plagiarism of the truth to come, or even a blaspheming distortion of it. With the 'confusions' of their sordid stories pagans had foreseen the 'contradictions' in a more divine sense of which Christianity would mark the advent. But since the child was born, and gave birth to his Virgin Mother, we must now see how this son-mother duo brought the Fathers into the world.

Patristic kinship structures

Heloise, who was mocking and ironical, liked to emphasize, in her letters to Abelard, the often crazy contradictions in names used between Christians: indeed the first letter from Heloise to Abelard is wickedly malicious and its theological impact has frequently gone unnoticed. Not quite knowing how to write to her ex-lover, she begins as follows: 'To my lord, or rather his father, his husband, or rather his brother, his maid, or rather his daughter, his wife, or rather his sister', before opting for 'to Abelard. Heloise', and ending with a very simple, anodyne 'my dearly

beloved', which in fact is more concise and far more reasonable.³ In short, having been husband and wife, they were both brother and sister to her nuns then Mother. Daughter to her Father, she was also Mother and sister to her son, who, when he became a father, was also brother to his father.

The all too famous 'basic kinship structures' can scarcely tolerate these semantic twists and turns, which did not escape the wisdom of someone like Lévi-Strauss⁴ when in fact it was not at all a matter of kinship. With regard to the birth of Christianity, it would appear that the topic needs to be re-examined since the 'umbilical' knot that Heloise put her finger on is only one tiny aspect of a problem pregnant with consequences.

We recall Dante's exclamation in *Paradise* (XXXIII, 1) addressing Mary, whom he calls 'Virgin mother, daughter of your son'. By the grace of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception presiding over the second birth of the 'god-bearing' Virgin (in this sense it could be said of Christ that, by the grace of mariological dogma, he is Father to his Mother), that Sibylline phrase assumes its full meaning, since the rules of Christian transmission, at least in the holy family and God's family, are contrary to the genealogical rules that became the custom in the Christian West.

Indeed Christ's Holy Family, the very example of what moderns have got used to calling the 'reconstituted family', is extremely complicated: the father is not his Father, Mary is his mother because she is his father's wife but she is his daughter in that she is a Virgin. And if in addition we agree that a 'father is not a second mother but, like a mother, also procreates', we are forced to acknowledge that Christianity, confirming Gregory of Nyssa's fears, was from the beginning a negation of the whole schema of transmission that was typical of the pre-Christian West. As Pierre Legendre warns us, 'we should take care to treat with caution humanity's inventions around the logic of kinship'.⁵ What he calls the 'discourse of the uncertain father' in fact focuses around the moment of the Annunciation, which St Bernard tells us left the virgin dumbstruck. But what is more surprising is Pierre Legendre's astonishment when he notes that 'belief in the Father is at zero', since it is the model of the gospel family itself that is the cause and that started a paternity suit, theologically speaking.⁶

When Chrétien de Troyes, in his *Perceval*, uses the image of the 'glorious father who made his daughter his mother', the inspiration from Christ is clear, even if he jumps a stage, because the father could have a daughter only if he was his mother's son: in other words it is by becoming a father that the son is truly a son, but then his mother is his sister. The same reversal can be found in various early Christian texts, for example in the Pseudo-Augustines: one of them, dating from the 8th century, talks about Mary as the 'daughter of God, mother of God', the other, older one stresses the originality of Christian invention: 'The creator brought forth the creator, the servant gave birth to the master, the daughter to the father: daughter in her divine nature, mother in her human nature.'⁷

The fact that the sexual identity of God is affected is the least important consequence of this, because the need for procreation is so great for this Father whose mother even brings about a hitherto unprecedented form of giving birth: for at least since Clement of Alexandria's *Pedagogue* we know that 'the Father is a true mother': 'In his way of loving the Father acquired what is characteristic of female nature'; 'the

Word is everything for his children, both Father and Mother'.⁸ But that is still not the end of this 'rhetoric of genealogy'⁹ and procreation based on the break-up of the Aristotelian reproductive model. Representing most of the Fathers in this respect, Ambrose of Milan came to expound a zoology which broke with previous systems: for Christians as for animals 'procreation' is more important than 'copulation'. 'Imitate the beasts at least or respect God', for animals have a 'natural shame at not interrupting the work of procreation' (Ambrose, *Exp. evang. sec. Lucam*, I, 43–4). This is also how Christians easily separate copulation from procreation, because though copulation is justified solely by procreation, there may be procreation without 'copulation', or following copulation outside natural laws (as between Abraham and Sara or Zacharias and Elizabeth).¹⁰ This same dissociation of copulation from procreation is expressed in the dogma of the virgin birth, with a consequence that has often gone unnoticed. Since procreation is set free from copulation, it can paradoxically take on board all possible forms of copulation, all types of case, from incest to adultery via procreation that ignores the constraints of the menopause and the elementary rules of gynaecology (see Abraham and Sara). But this matrimonial regime has its corollary on the father's side which only complicates the situation still further: the Father and the Son are two persons in power, but are only one; so the heavenly Father did not 'experience the work of procreation' (Ambrose, *op. cit.*, II, 66). We have come full circle: all possible cases are brought together, from procreation without copulation to giving birth without procreation.

However, as we have guessed with Heloise's jokes, the genealogical model of the Holy Family is not restricted to the rhetoric of genealogy mentioned above. While Roman law maintained the illusion of transmission governed by the *paterfamilias*, the Church in its very principle subverts that traditional pyramid. In its temporal incarnation, what Alexandre Leupin calls Christianity's 'theological triangle'¹¹ has already undergone a slight alteration which forms the basis for Clement's analysis: from Father, Son and Holy Spirit it has become Father, Son and Virgin Mary. But while in the 'oedipal triangle, . . . the relationship between functions is unchanging', the theological triangle allows 'a series of permutations of function':

For instance, Mary is both mother of God (in the shape of Christ) and daughter of God (insofar as Christ is strictly equivalent to God). She is also *Mater Ecclesia*, but at the same time *Filia Ecclesia* [the church, daughter of God]. Similarly Christ incarnate is the Church: which means he also performs the maternal function.¹²

And finally the Mother is a genuine Mother, but she becomes *ipso facto* her son. And becoming a Mother,¹³ that is 'daughter of herself', she finds herself orphaned and needs Fathers. One trinity casts out the other, but in this unstable, dynamic equilibrium each element is unable to hold its position for long:

This permutational nature of the triangle constitutes its historical effectiveness. Each person of the Trinity is likely to be or, rather, *is* every other person in the triangle: thus the field of positions is infinitely open and covers all possibilities. The ban on incest, in this triangle, is quite simply challenged by the Holy Spirit and virgin conception: here the father in the flesh, Joseph, is purely and simply dismissed. The result is that Christ is *sponsus Ecclesia*, the Bridegroom of the Church.¹⁴

In short the Church is its own Mother, and its son, who is simultaneously its father, is also its spouse.¹⁵ Then we only have to reintroduce Heloise's genealogical table to confuse people's minds completely: this incestuous triumph of matrimonial nihilism is infectious and forces us to rethink the model entirely. For with these successive shifts, the Mother, who becomes the wife of her son and father, has multiplied paternity *ad infinitum*. In short, if it 'is indeed certain that the Son created his mother', as Gregory the Great says in his 25th Homily, and if we should not be surprised that he 'is equal to his Father he who preceded his mother', a final complication arises, whose virtue, however, is to simplify. When the risen Christ emerges from the tomb and sees Mary Magdalene in John's Gospel, he calls her 'Myriam', his mother's name. In a sense his mother is still at his side. And it is her he asks not to 'cling to' him because he has not gone to his Father. In other words he is waiting for his mother, who is not his mother, to be mother of going to his father. It would be impossible to express better the perfect pre-Trinity rethink of all kinship links. The new relationships correspond precisely to the idea, dear to Ranke, that 'all ages are in the present before God': in the new Trinity there is no Father or Son since there is no mother. The consequence of the encounter escaped the disciples, evangelists and apostles. The end of this paternity suit – a parricide after the 'matricide' of the encounter with 'Myriam' – is a theological matter. So very early on, with Tertullian, the Fathers reconstructed 'Christ's Holy Family' following a logic that defies the elementary principles of Roman law.

Then there followed a whole series of questions in the light of which it was now necessary to consider another type of paternity, no longer that of the Father but of the so-called Fathers of the Church, which is at one and the same time Christ, daughter of Christ and bridegroom of Christ. What status should be given to us, sons of the Church, the fruit of many paternities irreducible to one another? What is the effect of the Fathers' necessarily late, *post partum* paternity on the generation of the Church? What remains of the traditional family model after this desertion of the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary, Joseph) for a Holy Family of Christ (Jesus, Mary, the Father) that scorns the 'basic kinship structures' and the 'oedipal triangle'? And finally, in what sense does this 'paternity suit', which is also a challenge to the father, change the idea we might have of the origins of Christianity? When the son is born before his mother and long before the Fathers who create her, what becomes of transmission, and more precisely transmission of God's word?

From the reversibility of kinship to uncertain sex

Whatever the case with the Holy Family, when we examine the distribution of roles, it soon appears that it is anything but a family compared with the normal Christian family: not only are the roles reversible, following the general reproductive model consecrated by the Church, but none of the family roles is defined by sex or position in the economy of procreation. The father is not the father since the Son has another Father; the mother is not a mother in the sense of the ordinary childbearer, because she is a virgin and her child was conceived by the Holy Spirit; in other words, from the outset the male/female gender dualism loses its meaning in this 'holy family'.

But the negation of the classic sexual model does not stop there, since this father who is not the sire and this mother who gives birth asexually are united by the fruit of their non-union, that is the Son, who proceeds from the Father and forms the pivot of a double trinity: the apparent family trinity of father–mother–son and the heavenly trinity, called Holy Trinity, consisting of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And if questions were asked about the sex of angels (and there was good reason to ask, since at least it was a recognition of the fact that an angel could have a sex – although androgynous and governed more by the regime of emanation than by that of procreation, according to Gregory of Nyssa),¹⁶ it was natural to ask questions too about the members of the Trinity. Islamic¹⁷ and Jewish criticism of Christianity for being a polytheism went so far as to emphasize this threefold division and deduce from it that if there were three persons and procreation, then the Trinity must be sexual, at least in its principle: hence the tendency to feminize the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ But it is also possible to proceed in the reverse direction: if the Trinity is asexual we might say that, because he belongs to the Trinity, it is the son who takes precedence over the nature of the parents. Thus the previously mentioned correlate of reversibility: the parents' sex depends on the Son. Since the Son generated himself – just as he 'killed himself' according to a trope in Origen, John of Apamea or Augustine – it is he who defines the sex of his parents; and so it is not certain that the mother is a woman nor the father a man, or in other words their virtual sexuality no longer determines their gender. That is probably the origin of a certain plasticity, 'the brunt' of which is borne by the Holy Spirit, who is always pre-sexed. The fact that Spirit, *Ru(a)h*, is feminine in Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac or Arabic fosters the recurring tendency to feminize the divine. What is less obvious is that the most female of the Trinity Father–Son–Holy Spirit is also the one that generates. 'La Sainte Esprit'¹⁹ is also masculinized.

One of the first effects is the feminization of the Father, of which traces can be found as early as Isaiah (42, 14), where the symbol of fertility is more direct: the poet presents God as a pregnant woman: 'I cry out like a woman in labour/suffocating, panting'. We are aware of the milk of the father and the pregnant man, Abraham's breast, Christ as a Super-male, but also the feminization of Jesus 'our Mother' (now it is not the Fathers who are fathers of their Mother but the Son who is the 'Mother of his Mother'). The list would be long of what seems to be nothing but folklore, yet sends a quite different echo when these elements are placed alongside the two founding families of Christianity: the Holy Family and the Holy Trinity. There is a circulation of gender and a circulation of function. Far from being to do with ontology, sex depends on its function; the son generates/procreates as much as his mother, or even more, when paternity is assumed almost exclusively outside sex (see Joseph but also the relationship of Father and Son in the Trinity). And so we have a better understanding of an androgynous, even hermaphrodite Christ dear to certain Gnostics than to various mystics (Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, and Hildegard von Bingen or Marguerite Porete as well) and this is so as early as *The Gospel of Philip* or *The Gospel of Thomas*. But we would be mistaken if we focused on the Son's androgyny or hermaphroditism as if it were exclusive to him. Indeed in a sense this dualism is never anything but a semantic legacy from the Father. For from the Hebrew bible God has a female face whose secret, as Hughes Didier has noted, was

well kept by translators,²⁰ determined to conceal 'the resplendent polysemy'. Thus in Exodus 33, 19 or Deuteronomy 4, 13 we have a God who is not gentle and 'merciful', as the 'phallogocentric' translators say, but a 'matrix' god (as André Chouraqui's accurate if dissonant translation puts it): and the matrix god (from *RèHèM*, matrix, bosom) is connected to *RaHaM*, 'womb' and 'girl' while evoking the classical word for merciful (*RaHIM*). The son's sexual 'bivalency' is thus already there in the Father. Apparently it is only the Holy Spirit that is able to maintain the masculinity of the Father and the Son . . . except that he procreates. There again the womb comes up in each person of the Trinity. The *Zohar* (*Tiqouné ha-Zohar*, 27 b) even confirms this in the very name of God, the Tetragram, which links male Y-V with female H-H: 'The Y represents the Father, the H the Mother, the V the Son and the second H the Daughter.'²¹ Of course this is only a retrospective reconstruction: this late 'kabbalism' clearly has no influence on the late Christian development of the Trinity (particularly in Hilaire de Poitiers).²² It remains true that the economy of the sexes and of procreation is the same. The 'sex that is not a sex', which Freud applied to the female, should be understood theologically as the male. And in that sense to be sexual means not to belong to any sex or to possess them all. It is in this sense that we should understand the 'feminization' of the Father and the son in Clement of Alexandria, for instance, who is more attentive than anyone else to the paternal and maternal dualism of both Father and son.

The transition from Old Testament 'fiction' to new Testament 'incarnation', or, to borrow modern terminology, from gender to sex (the sex of the Father is never anything but a metaphor, at best an allegory, as Origen would have said), should or could have changed everything. Compared with the threefold God the holy family is expressed as a doubling of the Father: the father, in the classic sense of sire, disappears in the person of Joseph, who becomes an uncertain and asexual father. He is in every respect maternal, except his name. The Mother is merely a sexless womb or matrix: in Luke 1, 26–38, she conceives Jesus without any man's help. In short the holy family is sexed but without sexuality. All sexual union is banned. Or if it is not, it is useless for procreation. Mary's 'miracle pregnancy' and her everlasting virginity confirm the perfect separation between sexuality and procreation. Conception of the son without sexuality confirms Lacan's proposition – 'there is no sexual relation' – but has yet another effect that is not without precedent in the history of religions. It is a matter of thinking not simply of kinship but also of conception without sex. With regard to the Greeks, Nicole Loraux has already stressed Athena's constant refusal of 'natural motherhood' and invites us to question the 'advantage a city of men, whose dream is self-perpetuation, finds in recounting its origins' avoiding '*in extremis* any sexual union'.²³ Compared to that ancient schema Christianity creates an additional aporia with the incarnation by introducing the 'genital flesh' that disturbed Origen so much that, moved by his 'kerygmatic urgencies', he opted for castration as the best approximation to the glorious body (but it is true that this was the expression of an eschatological impatience where the advent of the kingdom of the Gods was promised 'when you women stop conceiving').²⁴ In the meanwhile Christ was born with a penis that is obvious in many images of the baby Jesus. And we find it later in many scenes of the descent from the cross. Thus the mythology of reversible begetting goes hand-in-hand with another specifically Christian

mythology, of genitals that exist only if they are not used. Present in all constructions of the Trinity but useless for conception and procreation, genitals are never so conspicuous as when they seemingly go unused. From sexless procreation to genitals without procreation, the penis acquires its autonomy and becomes the ubiquitous phallus. What it is important to see now is that the same structure explains the female God and his hermaphroditism, the androgynous Jesus, Mary's virginity, the holy spirit's ambivalence and the triumphant virility of the dead Christ. In the Christian vision the logical need for these constructions is the same.

On Christ's genitals

In his commentary on *Christ's Descent from the Cross* by Francesco Salviati (Milan, c. 1540), for example, A. Leupin stresses that 'the veiled ithyphallus is being gazed upon by a Mary Magdalene who is extremely attentive (it is often the female sinner's function to verify the superhuman nature of the resurrected Christ) . . .':²⁵ indeed for the painter the erection of the *subligar*, or 'drapery-banner', is an essential sign of the resurrected body. And it was normal for the witness to this elevation to be a sinner who could recognize a body from that movement. It might even be said that the character of Mary Magdalene was invented – late on – with the sole purpose of providing that proof. Her presumed, but doubtful, knowledge of sexual matters makes her the most credible witness to Christ's fleshly reality, to what theologians have agreed to call his 'humanation': the woman of easy virtue, a practitioner of non-procreative sex, becomes the supreme witness for sexless procreation and the dead Christ's sex without a procreator.²⁶

Leo Steinberg's masterly study of the representation of Christ's body, and particularly his genitals, in nativity or descent from the cross scenes, at birth and death (the two moments when the genitals are least obvious, when erection is least likely), demonstrates that this is far from being a unique instance.²⁷ And the representation is too frequent for it to be a mere curiosity. The ubiquity of procreation without sex in Christian constructions of the Trinity and the Holy Family forces us now to wonder about the meaning of a penis without any conceivable procreation. This is the whole thrust of Alexandre Leupin's recent research, which analyses the emergence on the body of the baptized or crucified Christ of a 'phallic ghost', which he detects in a crucifixion by Emmanuel Lambardos (early 17th century) as well as a Georges Rouault canvas, via Mantegna, Raphael and Salviati.

In a sense, and this is the stumbling block in all the recent theories about Christ's 'sexuality', we should remember Artaud's saying that 'a true man has no sex' and conclude, as Derrida does: 'The true man has no sex since he should be his sex.'²⁸ Here we have the two extremes of the representation of Christ: now *phallophorous*, now completely *phallic*. From that viewpoint Mary Magdalene's gaze directed at the 'subligar', and her presence near a Christ body that is all genitals or phallic, support a dialectic that underlines the pertinence of another of Derrida's remarks: 'This swelling of the penis that has become a separate object is a sort of castration.'²⁹ The penis is ubiquitous on Christ's body, it is never more alive than when the rest of the body is dead. This is a version of castration, almost more psychic than physical,

which is a good summary of the Gnostic temptation: to procreate is first and foremost to generate death.

This is the meaning of the Kingdom of Heaven, for which 'eunuchs'³⁰ are required and for which a man such as Origen thought he could put down a deposit. However, if psychoanalysts are to be believed, who only read Augustine as everyone knows since Lacan, this 'castration' is synonymous with procreation without orgasm: sex in paradise is never anything but exercising a muscle. In *Summa Theologica* (IIIa, suppl. Q. 80, 1 & 3) Thomas Aquinas concurs with this by erasing not genitals but their use. The pleasure of living angels no longer has any connection, Alexandre Leupin adds, with copulation: 'The role assigned to the dead Christ's erect penis is thus purely symbolic and discursive, it is reduced to the demonstration of an affirmation.'³¹ This is the 'logic of sexual non-relations'. But far from being an end-point, this logic is also at the origin: as for the death and 'suicide of Christ', *autothanasia*, auto-generation is in the very principle of the Christian construction. Much more than a symbolic affirmation, it is a stage in the invention of the sexual body's autonomy whose effect is not simply to present the 'ultimate subtraction of the phallic function'. A. Leupin is partly correct in seeing this omnipresence and recognizing in Christ's triumphant member 'the affirmation of useless sexuality that is reduced to the pure hope of a life after death'. But in doing so he merely reads Augustine, contrary to all expectation, where Augustine least appears. 'Affirmation with radical subtraction in the background' also allows a reading outside theology, of the subject's emancipation and the invention of autonomy, even the use of pleasures, to which Michel Foucault devoted most of his last energy. If the Son of Man's metamorphosis into a phallus is the sign of a castration, a refusal of any sexual relation, a form of denial, it is also the affirmation of an original break in any necessary link between sex and sexuality, sexuality and procreation, sex and pleasure. Paradoxically it is less the pleasure of sex that is challenged than its procreative objective. That is another aspect, central to Christian nihilism, which secularization is finding it hard to break free of:

We men and women, who are destined to be reborn and be blessed with a magnificent erection or an expectation of orgasm, will be outside sex, plunged in contemplation of our naked limbs, henceforth gloriously incorruptible. The Real, at the end of human history, will accomplish the figure of its eternal emptiness; this is the Eden that the glorious Body is preparing for our idolatrous passions, and which makes the whole of Christian art the decisive representation of an ultimate, joyous nothingness: sense.³²

The force of the expression carries conviction, particularly in the vigour of the diagnosis of 'Christian nihilism'. But there remains a necessary corrective: the theology of Christ's death, which is also the generation of something else. Refusal of sex in order to abolish death is a moment in Christian thought; there is another, voluntary death through refusing the death that causes only dead people.³³ The joyous nothingness of sense is still present, but the emptiness comes down to earth where sex, which continually circulates from one person to another, loses its role in procreation and the morbidity of humankind. There persists only sex without procreation. A procreation without sex. A generation without copulation. And a pleasure with no medium. The nothingness seems to be that of pornography, which

thus looks like a Christian, though secularized, invention. In the vein of a thought of a Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida,³⁴ and if we do not focus on a particular moment in the general economy of sexual difference, this Christian mythology of procreation and useless, uncertain genitals takes on another meaning. There is nothing divine in sex. Sex is wholly human. Unless it is the sex that makes God. In which case Christian morality had no reason to exist. However, the sex remains and is not supernumerary. All of angelology and all of the theology of the Resurrection of a Gregory of Nyssa bear witness to it: it is not the sexual body that we are destined to lose but its limitation, its division into two. His androgynous Christ is no longer the mystics' image or slightly shameful metaphor but a physiological necessity, the model of an eternal felicity without procreation. Henceforth the non-procreative sexuality condemned by Christian morality appears as an imitation of heaven: like suicide it speaks of a just vision of things, but a misplaced anticipation.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Notes

1. As does Origen, *Homily on Luke*, XVII, 4.
2. See Schefer (1975: 29–30).
3. Ferroul (1996: 95).
4. Lévi-Strauss (1983: 291–9).
5. The passage that follows refers to the conclusion of Legendre (2000: 205–12), and, more generally, to Dauzat (2001a).
6. Dauzat (2001b: 91–2).
7. *Sermo de Virginitate Mariae*, PL, supplement II, col. 1187; *Sermo 195*, 3, *ibid.*, 39, col. 2108, quoted in Lévi-Strauss (1992).
8. Mallenkrott (1983: 21).
9. Buell (1999: 79).
10. Talking about Zacharias and Elizabeth, Ambrose nevertheless explains that Elizabeth 'blushed out of grace without acknowledging she was at fault', because she had 'conceived of a man: it is not permitted to think of a human birth otherwise' (*Exp. evang. sec. Lucam*, I, 45). He speaks quite differently about the birth of Jesus but the gynaecology is the same, with the copulation/procreation separation (*ibid.*, II, 43, 56 fin).
11. Leupin (2000a: 214–15).
12. Leupin (2000a: 214). See also Bynum (1982, ch. iv), on the maternal imagery of Jesus.
13. For curiosity's sake we should point out that the name 'Mother' given to the Church probably dates back to Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III, 24, 1, and is found in Tertullian, *Address to Martyrs* [French transl. in Hammam (1990: 23)]. See Delahaye (1958). The Church owes its title 'mother' to the fact that it 'brings people into the world of faith'.
14. Leupin (2000a: 214–15).
15. Kantorowicz (1957: 458).
16. See the section on Gregory of Nyssa in the fine study by Bertin (1986: 63–128).
17. To the objection that God cannot have a son because he has no wife Thomas Aquinas responds: 'Being carnal [Muslims] can think only in terms of flesh and blood' and so could not understand the Christian doctrine of the spiritual generation of the Son by the Father. Aquinas (1996: § 3, 33). Cf. Haddad (1985).

18. See Boespflug (1984), especially the second part with the section devoted to the anthropomorphic representation of the Trinity.
19. Didier (2000: 35–9).
20. Didier (2000: 32–3).
21. Didier (2000: 34), quoting the *Zohar*, i. It is interesting to note an iconological *hapax*, an altar-piece by Nicolas Froment (Saint-Sauveur, Aix-en-Provence, 1476), in which Mary is confused with the Burning Bush so that 'the revelation of the Name in fact becomes that of Woman' (Didier, 2000: 39).
22. Geoltrain (1998: 16–19) on the 'Trinity debate'.
23. Loraux (1990: 132 f.).
24. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromates*, 3, 9. The Gnostic *logion* quoted by the Church Father was received far beyond Gnostic circles.
25. Leupin (2000b: 116–18, and, on the *Salviati*, 120, fig. 63).
26. Dauzat (2001c).
27. Steinberg (1983). See also Wirth (1988: 506–8).
28. Derrida (1978: 279–80).
29. Derrida (1978: 280).
30. Ranke-Heinemann (1990).
31. Leupin (2000b: 121).
32. Leupin (2000b: 124).
33. Dauzat (1998).
34. Derrida (1987).

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