THE ONE SEX THEORY AND WHY IT STILL MATTERS

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INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

When I first read Thomas Laqueur’s *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*,¹ I had a rare ‘epiphanic moment’. Could the ancient world really have believed there was only one sex? As I gradually assimilated the possibility that Laqueur was right, and found confirmation of it in some contemporary Classical and New Testament Studies, I allowed this theory to permeate my last two books.² In this paper, I want to trace out my further thinking about the continuing importance of the one-sex theory. In this paper I attempt

1. To describe what happened in our social and intellectual history, within the modern period, which leaves us thinking that there are two sexes;

2. To uncover the reliance of much Church and theological teaching about sex and gender upon the language and nomenclature of late modernity, rather than upon considerations of theology and Christology;

3. To suggest that the task of theology is to map the redeeming of the one sex, not the baptizing of two; and to ask how this might be expressed at the present time.

One outcome of the paper is the accusation that the churches are lost in a fog of self-willed amnesia about sex and gender, a condition I met in the 1990s when researching the history of marriage. Marriages apparently begin with weddings and couples aren’t supposed to have pre-marital sex. But the 18th century saw the legal dissolution of the institution of betrothal as a beginning of marriage, the telescoping of the spousals and the nuptials, the manufacture of ‘engagement’, the valorization of virginity in the market-place for unsullied bourgeois brides, and so on. These changes become accepted within half a century, by which time Christians were finding these new-fangled modern views unproblematically taught by the very Scriptures themselves. I’m now suggesting a similar process occurred, in the same century, with regard to the manufacture of two sexes.

Since I have already read a paper here on the one-sex theory I shall say no more about its contours [see Powerpoint slides], and move directly to the first aim, 1) To describe what happened in our social and intellectual history, within the modern period, which leaves us thinking that there are two sexes.

1. TWO SEEDS, ONE SEX

1.1 TWO SEEDS – NEW DOUBTS

I looked for lingering evidence of the one-sex theory in my local Plymouth Medical Society Discovery Library Collection of rare books on medical history, located in the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry at Derriford Hospital. I discovered a second edition of a rare tome, by a doctor, Francois Mauriceau, (1637-1709) *The Diseases of VVomen with Child, And in Child-bed*, the

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second edition of which was published in 1683. The first chapter describes and illustrates ‘The Parts of a Woman Destin’d to Generation’.

The work lends the full authority of the emerging science of anatomy to the standard belief that women, being men, have testicles; it describes what female testicles do; why these testicles are inferior to men’s (no surprise there!); and why women need to have an orgasm (or orgasms) to conceive.

Every Woman hath two Testicles as well as Men, being also for the fame ufe, which is to convert into fruitful Seed the Blood that is brought to them by the Preparing Veffels...; but they differ from those of Men in feituation, figure, magnitude, fubftance, temperature, and compofition.

Testicles receive refined blood and convert it into sperm. In men and women this blood is made ready by the work of special blood vessels, called ‘Preparing’ or ‘Spermatick Vessels’:-

The Spermatick Veffels in Women, called Preparing, because they prepare and convey to the Tefticles, the Blood, of which Seed is engendred, differ not from those in Men, either in number, rife, or ufe, but only in their infection, and manner of their diftribution;...

So women have two testicles. They do what men’s testicles do. I take rife to mean ‘to become active, or ‘to produce or give rise to’: infection is about their location in male and female bodies; and distribution is about where the sperm goes after its manufacture. Women’s spermatic vessels don’t just prepare blood for semen-making. They carry away menstrual blood as well. (A pregnant woman, of course, is nurturing her child with the same blood.)

Several further details are important. First, women’s testicles are located where they are because women are cold: ‘...and as the temperament of Women is much more cold and moift than of Men, for the heat of their Tefticles is weaker.’ The internal location of women’s testicles addresses this problem, but only partly. Second, a consequence of women being cold is that their seed is ‘much more waterifh than Mens’. Third, the process of sperm-making begun in the spermatic vessels is completed by the testicles themselves. What happens?

Now the Womens Seed being elaborated and perfected in their Tefticles, and having there received its prolifick virtue, is carried into the ejaculatory Veffels...

Fourth, women need to ejaculate, as the name of the alleged equipment for that purpose suggests. Fifth, they do it by having an orgasm (or orgasms). Sixth, the longer the ‘ejaculatory vessels’, the greater the pleasure the woman has: following Laurentius, Mauriceau observes ‘big-bellied Women find more pleafure in Coition, than others, becaufe the Seed is then difcharged by a longer Paffage.’ Finally he compares the womb to a field where seed is sown, but his analogy is not the one we might

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8 Mauriceau, *The Diseases of VVomen with Child*, p.11.
expect (where the man is the sower and the woman is the field), for what is sown there is provided by male and female seeds sown together:

> We may, with good reason, compare the Womb to a fruitful Field; ... for... the Seed of Men and Women (tho potentially containing in them the Form and Idea of all the parts of a Child to be engendred out of it) would never produce so admirable an effect, if they were not poured into the fruitful Field of Nature, to wit, the Womb, which having received both, embraceth them closely, and by its heat and particular properties, making use of the Spirits, with which the Seed abounds, immediately separates the Chaos, and afterwards delineates and tracest forth all the part of the Body of an Infant, which it perfects, nouriseth, and prefers to the full time of Labour.³

Mauriceau offers as a fact that ‘as the temperament of Women is much more cold and moist than of Men, so the heat of their Testicles is weaker.’ The lesser heat of women belongs to Aristotelian physics and is based on assumptions about the four elements of which all material things consist, and the four humors, based on the four elements, which comprise human bodies. The four elements are earth, air, fire (or heat) and water. Each of them has distinctive qualities: ‘fire was hot and dry; air, moist and hot; water, cold and moist; and earth, cold and dry.’¹⁰ As Janet Schiebinger explains,

> The human body was composed of four humors corresponding to the four elements of the cosmos: blood (like air) was hot and moist; phlegm (like water) was cold and moist; yellow bile (like fire) was hot and dry; and black bile or the melancholic humor (like earth) was cold and dry.

To the ancient mind, she continues,

> Temperament (sexual or otherwise) was also defined by the propensity to be hot or cold, wet or dry. Everything in the universe had a temperament. Things hot and dry – the sun, for example – were considered masculine, while things cold and moist – like the moon, or western regions of the earth – were considered effeminate.... In this sense masculinity and femininity had nothing to do with the sexual nature of men or women but resulted from a specific mix of the four elements.¹¹

That is why Aristotle spoke of the nature of the earth as something female, calling it “mother,” while the heaven and sun were given the title of “generation” and “father.”¹² (See the figure below). As the diagram shows, there were ‘womanish men’ and ‘manly women’, and such people were to be expected to be produced from the different combinations of elements, humors and qualities. That is a point to which we will need to return.

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I mentioned earlier that the edition I consulted was a second edition. It contained a commentary by the editor, Francois Chamberlen. This commentary is especially useful for understanding how, in the short period between the first and second edition, the earlier view was already being challenged. Chamberlen frankly disagrees with Mauriceau. ‘Our Author’, he says, is ‘lying under a Miftake’. Women, he claims, in 1683, don’t have testicles at all. They have Ovaria. They don’t make seed. There aren’t any vessels for conveying it to the womb. Women have Eggs which get impregnated:

We find that the Tefticles of a Woman are no more than, as it were, two clufters of Eggs, which lie there to be impregnated by the spirituous Particles, or animating Effluviums, conveyed out of the Womb through the two Tubes, called by our Author Deferent Veffels. And as he is miftaken in the Tefticles, fo is he likewise in an Error in his acceptance of the VVoman’s Seed: For indeed there is none fent forth by the Ejaculatory Veffels (by us called Fallopius’s Tubes) in coition, there being no Seed in the Ovaria, or Tefticles: But some days after the impregnation of the Egg, or Eggs, as in Twins, they decide through thofe two Tubes into the WVomb, where being placed, the Embrio takes up its quarters.  

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Chamberlen’s interjection into the text is especially instructive, for it indicates the anatomical upheaval that was going on at the time of the political upheavals after the civil war, and it enables us to date it fairly precisely.

I take the two-seed theory, against most current assumptions in sexual theology and ethics, to be the standard view about conception within Christianity until the last third of the 17th century. It is even found in the New Testament. The Greek of Hebrews 11:11a is

Πιστει και αυτη Σαρρα δυναμιν εις καταβολην σπερµατος ελαβεν.

The translators of the King James Version (published as everyone knows at the beginning of the same century) render that verse

Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed.

That translation is not only the most literal. I suspect the translators had no second thoughts about it, since it referred to the standard theory of conception in England in 1611, just as it probably was in Palestine in New Testament times. Of course women conceive seed. Women are men! But before trashing the theory, there are advantages to be observed in it. Here are four.

1.3 ADVANTAGES OF THE TWO SEED THEORY

First, the ‘Spirituous Substance’ or ‘Spirits’ are jointly produced, whereas in the rival Aristotelian theory, it is male sperm only which conveys the mysterious quickening properties to the womb. Second, while huge differences remained in the gendered apprehension by men and women of each other, there actually was a greater bodily commonality between them than in the growing rival view that there are two sexes which are ‘opposite’ to each other. On the one-sex model, men and women shared the same reproductive equipment for generating (though not for gestating) life.

SEX WITHOUT PASSION

Third, the belief that women, like men, required an orgasm to ejaculate their seed, was very important for women. All Christians thought that there was only one purpose for sex: procreation within marriage. Once it became known that female orgasm was unnecessary for pregnancy to occur, a whole new era of expected ‘passionlessness’ on their part was ushered in, which, even now, may not be quite dispelled. There is a massive change in the theological apprehension of these matters in this period. In the earlier view women had to have an orgasm to justify having sex at all. A husband who had sex with his wife without ensuring that she came too, was cheating on her. He was thought to be having sex with her in a deliberately sterile, or contraceptive, way. Within little more than a century, the opposite view was accepted. Since a woman’s orgasm is not needed for the purpose of sex to be executed, it became quickly discouraged, because the pleasure associated with it had no procreative purpose and became associated with libidinous excess – a lustful epiphenomenon, fraught with moral danger.

SURPRISING INCLUSIVITY

The one sex theory, with its two seeds, four elements and four humors, provides a niche for men and women who in modern parlance would be called intersex, ‘third sex’, or transgender. The balance of elements and humors would sometimes give rise to ‘manly women’ and ‘womanish men’. Earlier generations would have had no difficulty in extending the bounds of bodily normality to such
people, because their presence in the human world was ‘explained’ by the unique combination of elements and humors (together with other factors like time, region, season and diet) and there was no rigorous sexual binary to one of which they would be required to be assigned.

2. THE TRIUMPH OF THE TWO-SEX, ONE-SEED THEORY

EARLY DEFENDERS OF TWO SEEDS

Regarding reproduction, Galen’s ‘two-seed theory’ and Aristotle’s ‘one-seed theory’ existed side by side in the ancient world. In any case both of them were little more than guesswork. But as almost all of Aristotle’s works faded into academic oblivion from c.600 to c.1100, Galen’s view prevailed. The recovery of Aristotle’s writings in the twelfth century led to vigorous discussion among high medieval theologians who initially resisted the single seed heresy. Here are three examples. The Dominican Encyclopaedist Vincent of Beauvais (d.ca. 1264) uses the two-seed theory to demonstrate that ‘women were not only more lustful than men but more lustful than all female animals with the possible exception of the mare.’

William of Conches (d.ca. 1154) notes how ‘In contrast with the single pleasure of a man’s ejaculation, woman enjoys a twofold pleasure in coitus, both expelling and receiving seed.’ Thomas of Cantimpré (d.ca. 1270), ‘an unabashed two-seeder (arguing that those who deny the existence of a female seed clearly lie),’ represented the male and female seed struggling for dominance in the womb in order to establish a likeness in the child more like their own. Gradually the Aristotelian view gained ground in the Church (due in large part to the influence of Aquinas), but the European medical establishment took much longer to become convinced.

NEW POLITICS: NEW KNOWLEDGE

The influence of Descartes led to a renewed belief a human being was an incorporeal subject. Men and women were at least equal in this. In this thought-world, people became essentially immaterial, thinking things attached to bodies. Poullain de la Barre’s words ‘The mind has no sex’ reverberated around Europe in the second half of the 17th century. Some other way of maintaining women’s inferiority therefore had to be found, and was found, on demand as it were, in the newly-discovered reproductive organs. Since difference could no longer be founded on the old transcendental order, it had to be established on something else, and the rising sciences of biology and anatomy were eager to oblige by exposing women’s bodies as belonging to a different sex. These bodies were probed, not for the promotion of the health of women, but for new evidence of the old view: that they were inferior. That evidence was found not simply in the reproductive organs, but in the depiction of the female skeleton and that essential device for motherhood, the womb. The evidence showed that women were not simply men *manqué*, but were a different sex altogether.

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Schiebinger’s work has a series of pictures of 18th century skeletons used in medical education. She illustrates how ‘By the 1790s, European anatomists presented the male and female body as each having a distinct telos – physical and intellectual strength for the man, motherhood for the woman.’ Typically the skull of a man would be depicted, incorrectly, as larger than that of a woman in relation to the bodies of each. Muscularity was the hallmark of the male sex. Wide hips, ‘perfect’ bellies, and therefore narrow ribs, were the hallmarks of the child-bearing sex, all as nature intended:

Representations of the human body in the eighteenth century were laden with cultural values. Illustrations of male and female skeletons represented the bones of the male and the female body; but they also served to produce and reproduce contemporary ideals of masculinity and femininity.

The Enlightenment thinkers had to deal with a dilemma. On the one hand, the mind has no sex; all ‘men’ are equal; and natural rights are not to be denied to half the human race. On the other hand, if these theories were true, how could women be kept in their subordinate place? Beautiful answers lay to hand. There were not just natural rights, there were also ‘natural inequalities’. As Laqueur says,

The universalistic claims made for human liberty and equality during the Enlightenment did not inherently exclude the female half of humanity. Nature had to be searched if men were to justify their dominance of the public sphere, whose distinction from the private would increasingly come to be figured in terms of sexual difference.

Science thought it could prove the inferiority of women in all things except child-bearing. Rousseau is accredited with the modern theory of complementarity, which despite the addition of the principle of equality of the sexes in some 20th century thought, held no such status for women in the 1760s. Schiebinger says it was

a theory which taught that man and woman are not physical and moral equals but complementary opposites, fit [sic] neatly into dominant strands of liberal democratic thought, making inequalities seem natural while satisfying the needs of European society for a continued sexual division of labor by assigning women a unique place in society. Henceforth, women were not to be viewed merely as inferior to men but as fundamentally different from, and thus incomparable to, men.

The ‘unique place’ was, of course, the home. The theory was ‘designed to keep women out of competition with men in the public sphere and, at the same time, to preserve the family within the state.’

3. THE TWO SEX THEORY PROJECTED BACK

I now make a direct accusation. Christian theology and Christian sexual ethics have picked up the two-sex theory, read it back into the Bible and Tradition, and then claimed biblical warrant

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20 Laqueur, Making Sex, p.194.
for it. This manoeuvre enables them to invest the institution of heterosexuality with divine authority, and of course to marginalise all sexual nonconformists. Here are four brief examples.

3.1 **Example 1: Hans Urs von Balthasar**

Von Balthasar is perhaps the clearest example of a modern sexual binarist, for whom a person is born, and remains either male or female, right down to every cell in that person’s body. For that reason he is the Magisterium’s favourite theologian of gender. He writes ‘Man only exists in the opposition of the sexes, in the dependence of both forms of humanity, the one on the other’.

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. At the same time both share an identical human nature, but at no point does it protrude, neutrally, beyond the sexual difference, as if to provide neutral ground for mutual understanding.

Far-reaching theological criticisms have been made of Balthasar’s theology of gender. I add to them only the observation that ‘the opposition of the sexes’ is a modern construct, and his attempt to erect a theology of sexual difference on alleged biological facts (this time on cellular determination) belongs to a long tradition by which dubious socio-cultural norms are read off human bodies.

3.2 **Example 2: Karl Barth**

There has been ample criticism of Barth’s understanding of the relation between the sexes. It is well known he proclaimed an absolute distinction between masculine and feminine, and advocated that it must be preserved at all costs.

This distinction insists upon being observed. It must not be blurred on either side. The command of God will always point man to his position and woman to hers. In every situation, in face of every task and in every conversation, their functions and possibilities, when they are obedient to the command, will be distinctive and diverse, and will never be interchangeable.

Jane Shaw has identified two faults with his procedure. ‘In short,’ she says, ‘Barth goes straight from his reading of Genesis 2 to the Pauline texts on headship, writing always with the presuppositions of his own day about the ‘nature’ and ‘roles’ of men and women.’ She finds, fairly, I think, a two-fold ignorance here – first, going straight from the present into the biblical texts while ignoring the contexts in which they were written; and second, an ignoring of the presuppositions of modernity.

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about the separate natures, spheres and roles of men and women, which were surrounding him. ‘The irony here’, she says, ‘is that Barth has his history wrong – or just plain absent – precisely because it was only with the advent of modernity that scientists began to think that women and men...’ were not alike.\textsuperscript{29} Her judgement confirms my case that the most exalted theologians, ignore or re-write Tradition in their rush to enlist the support of Scripture for skewed gender norms.

3.3 \textbf{Example 3: Catechism of the Catholic Church}

The \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church} dissertation plays an irony of a different kind. On the one hand, it is paradoxically unabashed in its use of the concepts of modernity: on the other hand, it lambasts many of its fruits. Under the stern shadow of the exegesis of the commandment forbidding adultery, something called ‘sexuality’ is said to affect ‘all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul.’\textsuperscript{30} ‘Everyone, man and woman,’ is exhorted to ‘acknowledge his sexual \textit{identity}. ‘Physical, moral and spiritual \textit{difference} and \textit{complementarity}’ are said to be ‘oriented toward the goods of marriage.’ ‘In creating men “male and female”, God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity.’\textsuperscript{31} Unmistakeably there are two sexes, for ‘Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in a different way.’\textsuperscript{32} The two-sex theory is traced to Genesis 1:27: and the modern vocabulary of identity, difference, sexuality, equality, and complementarity is all deployed in less than half a page. No problem with these, then!

These sentiments may be compared with the commentary on the same commandment in the \textit{Catechism of the Council of Trent} (1566) more than 400 years earlier. The language of the earlier document is simpler and more pastorally engaged. ‘The bond between man and wife’ is said to be ‘one of the closest, and nothing can be more gratifying to both than to know that they are objects of mutual and special affection.’\textsuperscript{33} Catholics are not to offend against the sin of chastity and they are to practice ‘The Custody of the Eyes’ to avoid adultery. The language of the modern Catechism was still 300 hundred years over the horizon. The point is not that the Tridentine Fathers did not use the language that they could not have used, including language about there being two sexes. It is rather that a comparison between the two Catechisms shows how ingrained the sexual discourse of modernity has become. It has embedded itself in the most authoritative available articulation of the Catholic faith. It has passed itself off as natural, while it brings with it assumptions that cannot be easily reconciled with pre- and early modern Catholic Thought.

3.4 \textbf{Anglican Musings}

The Church of England’s \textit{Some Issues in Human Sexuality} (2003) tells Anglicans that one of their ‘core beliefs’ about ‘human sexual activity’\textsuperscript{34} is ‘that the division of humankind into two distinct but complementary sexes is not something accidental or evil but is, on the contrary, something good

\begin{itemize}
\item[29] Shaw, ‘Reformed and Enlightened Church’, p.226.
\item[31] \textit{Catechism of the Catholic Church}, para.2333, p.500 (authors’ emphasis).
\item[33] Catechism of the Council of Trent (1566).
\end{itemize}
established by God himself when he first created the human race. Two sexes and their complementarity are apparently embedded in the opening chapter of the Bible and have been understood to have been located there throughout the whole history of the people of God. These assumptions are breath-taking! Relegated to an end-note is the acknowledgement ‘It is true that St Gregory of Nyssa held that the division of humanity into male and female was a secondary action by God that followed on after his creation of humanity in his image and was intended to provide for the propagation of the race after the Fall.’ But Gregory and the twentieth century Orthodox theologian Nikolai Berdyaev ‘are the exceptions that prove the rule. The overwhelming consensus of the Christian tradition has been that the division of humanity into two sexes was an original and integral part of God’s creative plan.’ Who needs history, especially when it is inconvenient?

4. SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE AND ETHICS

4.1 MARRIAGE

Advocates of two sexes cite Genesis 1:26-27 as their foundational text:

26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (KJV)

The use of Genesis 1:27 attributed to Christ Himself by Mark and Matthew can make excellent sense for modern readers without the modern assumptions that equality and complementarity are conveniently built into it. Let us imagine (no more than that) that when Jesus uttered the words “God made them male and female”, he was thinking standard thoughts about the one-sex continuum. That would disrupt modern assumptions about what was going on, but it could still preserve the transformative potential of the passage. Just because women are believed to be inferior and weaker, and lack the social power and influence of men, that is, just because they are not equal to men, as Christ acknowledges, they are not to be disposed of, for ‘any reason’ (the debating point onto which Jesus was drawn). That might be why the sin of adultery which the re-marriage of the husband entails, is described not as a sin against God (which it surely was) but against the divorced wife (‘Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her’ – Mk.10:11). The quality of the marital bond is described as ‘one flesh’, but that designation, reflecting back to the first man discovering his own flesh in the woman taken from his side, is clearly one of unity. It says or implies nothing about two sexes, nor about their equality. The mythical derivation of the body of Eve from Adam and his recognition of his own flesh in her, are beliefs more hospitable to the one-sex theory than to the modern belief in opposite sexes.

4.2 SEXISM

The late modern sin of sexism is also a consequence of the belief in two sexes. The default position of Christianity is not that there are two sexes, but that there is one sex in which women are imperfect and inferior versions of men. The new sexism takes two sexes for granted. Even the classic exposé of sexism, Ruether’s Sexism and God-Talk (1983) does not articulate this default

35 Some Issues in Human Sexuality, para.1.2.9, p.10.
36 Some Issues in Human Sexuality, note 9, p.327.
position, and one of the achievements of classical scholarship over the last 30 years is to make the one-sex theory more obvious than it was then. Ruether says

On the one hand, deeply rooted in Christian thought is an affirmation of the equivalence of maleness and femaleness in the image of God. This has never been denied, but it has tended to become obscured by a second tendency to correlate femaleness with the lower part of human nature in a hierarchical scheme of mind over body, reason over passions.37

But ‘maleness and femaleness’ are not equivalent in the image of God, prior to the identification of femaleness with body, passion, and so on. Even Luther to whom Ruether appeals in support of her equivalence doctrine does not say men and women are equivalent before the Fall. He says the two are ‘similar’:

Although Eve was a most extraordinary creature similar to Adam so far as the image of God is concerned, that is, in justice, wisdom, and happiness she was nevertheless a woman. For as the sun is more excellent than the moon (although the moon, too, is a very excellent body), so the woman, although she was a most beautiful work of God, nevertheless was not the equal of the male in glory and prestige.38

4.3 THE HUMAN NATURE OF CHRIST

Ruether famously asked ‘Can a Male Saviour Save Women?’ The conundrum she sets out here is the one sex theory I described earlier:

The male alone is the normative or generic sex of the human species; only the male represents the fullness of human nature, whereas woman is defective physically, morally, and mentally. It follows that the incarnation of the Logos of God into a male is not a historical accident but an ontological necessity.39

The failure of alternative Christologies leads her to ask, ‘Must we not say that the very limitations of Christ as a male person must lead women to the conclusion that he cannot represent redemptive personhood for them?’40 Her solution is ‘a reencounter with the Jesus of the synoptic Gospels, not the accumulated doctrine about him but his message and praxis.’41 But I do appeal to the orthodoxy she rejects. The Church decided against Nestorius that in the one Christ there were two Persons, and claimed that the Christ was one Person and that that Person was divine. Christ has, or is, or was, no human person at all: what he had was a human nature, and that single nature expresses the divine being in a particular but non-deficient way. The point Ruether misses is that the divine Personhood which Christ humanly represents and is, is not sexed. Being divine, it stands beyond the creaturely sexual distinction. The hermeneutical move that the correct diagnosis of the one-sex theory requires, is not the jettisoning of the old Christology, but the unveiling of features of it to

39 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, p.106.
40 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, p.114.
41 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, p.114.
which our living in late modernity compels us to draw attention. The divine Christ is beyond the distinctions of sex. What requires revision are the New Testament assumptions about gender and their modern replacements.

4.4 Same-sex Desire

The two-sex theory lies at the root of the terminology that began to be adopted by the medical profession around 140 years ago. The terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ were both coined in 1869.\(^{42}\) No sense could be given to a term containing *homo* (‘same’) as its prefix unless there were two or more sexes. (A “heterosexual” was at first a term of *deviance*. It named people who had straight sex for pleasure, like pregnant women or couples who had oral sex without intercourse, for purposes ‘other’ than procreation.\(^{43}\) The terms were soon to become identity markers. The wrongness of ‘homosexual acts’ (as the Catholic Church calls them) came to be located as a deviation from ‘normal’, ‘opposite sex’, activity. Obviously homosexual acts were deemed wrong before they were so called. They were ‘sodomy’ (an invention of the 11th century), or ‘irrational copulation’, or a ‘crime against nature’, and so on.\(^{44}\) They wasted precious seed. They were non-procreative and so contrary to the entire τελος of sex. And in the UK they remained criminalised until 1967.

The adoption of these modern terms by the churches introduced novel non-theological reasons for proscribing ‘same-sex’ intimacy, and they conveniently occluded the earlier, now disreputable, theological ones. These earlier reasons now appear ridiculous. I have described elsewhere how the wrongness of men having sex with men was probably justified on two main grounds: the mixing of kinds, and the infraction of gender.\(^{45}\) Yet, we mix kinds at will. Most of the sex that most of us enjoy, most of the time, is not procreative. Most expressions of intimacy (or ‘sexual acts’) that straight couples enjoy today have been proscribed throughout most of Christendom. We have different ways of assessing sexual acts in terms of body-language, the expression of devotion, and so on. But the principal reason for biblical proscriptions of male-male penetration is gender infraction. The passive partner gets penetrated. He is womanised, feminised. He loses his masculine status and so his superior likeness to God. But since Christians are slowly losing the notion that it is a bad thing to be a woman, the gender slide no longer holds the terrors it once did. The two-sex theory of course helped to replace the single-sex continuum. But the churches have used it to erect a new orthodoxy which causes immense harm. Whereas the new terms were readily adopted by social historians and medical doctors because they lacked the stereotyping and stigmatising force of the old names, conservative forms of Christianity have managed to reunite the old stigma with the new nomenclature.

4.5 Intersex and Transgender Conditions

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\(^{43}\) Cameron & Kulick, *Language and Sexuality*, p.46.


\(^{45}\) Thatcher, *God, Sex and Gender*, pp.167-8.
Intersex and transgender people have had particular reason to rebel against bi-polar sexuality for they cannot identify completely with either of the two sexes. Their social status within a pre-modern understanding of gender is to be preferred, and has much to teach us about both conditions. John Hare, a theologian who is also a consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist, says the intersex condition affects 1 in 50 people. Transsexual or ‘transgender’ conditions are much rarer. There is now a growing theology of intersex, led by Susannah Cornwall, whose work successfully queries ‘the strands within Christian theology which privilege clearly-sexed, heteronormative configurations of sexes, sexualities and genders to the exclusion of people whose bodies or identities do not “fit”. ’It becomes far more difficult’, she observes, ‘to unproblematically assert that women should not be ordained, or be made bishops, if we can no longer be quite so certain of what a woman actually is.’

Cornwall proposes a re-reading of Galatians 3:28 in which ‘male-and-female’ is precisely the single sex continuum that redemption in Christ brings to an end. Perhaps. I think this system is also undermined by a consideration of the figure of the eunuch in the Bible. A eunuch is not the same as a castratus. Within a one-sex, multigendered model of human bodies the presence of people with ambiguous genitals was unremarkable and indeed expected. So was the behaviour expected of such persons. They were not required to conform to the defined roles of one of two sexes (whether or not assisted by surgery) because the two-sex binary did not exist. According to Janet Everhart there are 41 occasions in the Hebrew Bible where ‘eunuch’ is an appropriate translation of various Hebrew words. The category in Scripture can be extended to anyone whose genitalia are ambiguous. Two features of eunuchs in the ancient world generally are said to be their location ‘near the heart of political and/or religious networks’, and their liminality, ‘crossing thresholds that present barriers to both men and women’. This very liminality ‘is often a source of power’. They ‘highlight the reality of a world where gender is not always binary’. Their existence outside fixed binaries enables them to become messengers, mediators, communicators, and so on, especially between men and women in royal courts and on government business.

5. Redeeming the One Sex?

Advocacy of the one sex should not be taken as a plea to return to it. It aims at refuting the complacent assumption that Christianity has always taught that there are two sexes, and at dissolving new and vicious arguments that same-sex love is contrary to God’s grand heterosexual plan for humanity. And it aims at recovering insights from earlier views which may illuminate our present dilemmas. The one sex theory matters because theological prejudices against women were, and are, rooted in it, and the two sex scientific alternative contains ideological distortions which valorize difference at women’s expense.

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48 Cornwall, Sex and Uncertainty, p.73.
5.1 THEOLOGY AND SEXES

Christian theology need not pronounce whether there are two sexes, or one, or whether there is any merit in the suggestion that there might be five – men, women, together with 'herms', 'ferms' and 'merms'.\(^{52}\) We are just opposed to any ideologies which oppress people or inhibit the exercise of justice and love towards and among them. There will always be a provisionality about the language of science, and strong reason to think that when sexual binaries were brought into it, they were accompanied, if not driven, by an ideology which talked up and over-emphasised sexual difference for political purposes. In this respect there is much to learn from 'queer biology' or 'cultural biology' which

argues that our understanding of the biological world is framed by what we think we already know, rather than consider[ing] that such evidence might undermine our taken-for-granted conception of the world. It also suggests that sexual difference should be given no more symbolic significance than many of the other differences that distinguish one human being from another. From this perspective, absolute sexual dimorphism remains one of the last false metanarratives governing our thinking, and contributes to a relationship between the sexes grounded in hierarchy and privilege.\(^{53}\)

Similarly there can be no objection to the medical language by which modern societies talk about sex when it is salutary to do so. But that language, rooted in bodies exposed to empirical scrutiny, has created identities out of all proportion to the humanistic intentions of its architects. Can a revisionary theology contribute anything to the resolution of these difficulties?

5.2 THE REVISIONARY TASK

The revisionary task for a Christian Sexual Theology is to indicate how Christ redeems gender: how the relations between men and women are lifted out of power-based distortions (and also power-based reversals) which take masculine hegemony for granted (and among religions, root these in the all-powerful male God). I have written elsewhere about the sources for this task. They lie in the doctrine of the Social Trinity, where Persons are co-equal and where the difference and otherness of each of the Persons does not disrupt, but rather completes the fullness of their Communion.\(^{54}\) They lie in the one, divine Person of Christ, who by his divinity is beyond the distinctions of sex.\(^{55}\) They lie in the queer body of that Christ, interchangeably Bridegroom and Bride, and as Bride being men and women both.\(^{56}\) They lie in the eucharistic body of Christ where the giving of a body as the measure of divine Love speaks more than words can do.\(^{57}\) And so on. Whereas the eschatological hope at one time lay in the restoration of the one sex to its perfected maleness and the elimination of all female elements,\(^{58}\) that same hope may be nurtured in our time.

\(^{53}\) Dee Amy-Chinn, ‘Is Queer Biology a Useful Tool for Queer Theology?’, *Theology and Sexuality* 15.1, 2009 [49-63], p.50 (author’s emphasis).
\(^{54}\) Thatcher, *God, Sex and Gender*, pp.104-5: 118-22.
\(^{56}\) Thatcher, *God, Sex and Gender*, pp.137-49.
\(^{57}\) Thatcher, *God, Sex and Gender*, pp.111-13.
by the vision of a restored humanity where all our differences are no longer any bar to the full communion of persons. Here at last is a vision worth sustaining and striving for.

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