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PATRISTICS AND GENDER

PATRISTIKA I ROD

EDITOR'S NOTE

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This collection of thematically organized original studies presents and discusses the notion of gender in patristics, that is, in the early Christian authors, usually referred to as Fathers of the Church. The Fathers of the Church have not dealt with the notion of gender as different from the notion of sex and for them these two notions were synonymous. Moreover, the patristic authors shared the Christian late antique worldview on gender as a combination of ancient philosophical views on the sexes, of the wisdom of the Old Testament as well as of the new Christian message.

The Greek ancient world has dealt with the one-sex model developed in the history of medicine, beginning with Aristotle and Galen. In the one-sex model the differentiation between the sexes was drawn based on the position of their genitals. It was perceived that men have their genitals outside the body, while women have their genitals inside the body. Thus, female and male were homologues. The difference in the position of genitals of male and female inspired Aristotle to define the difference between men and women in terms of deprivation or lack. Thus, according to Aristotle due to lacking the possibility for rational and active action, that was allegedly man's attribute, the woman was considered to be a lesser man. The differentiation between men and women led to their separation and it served for the denial or restriction of women's rights in society.

The Old Testament's message was quite different. The account of the creation of the human being from the Book of Genesis stated that God created humankind 'in his own image' (*Gen. 1: 26-27*), and that God created them as 'male and female' (*Gen. 1: 27*), and as 'man and woman' (*Gen. 2: 23*). This account indicates the natural equality of men and women, and the consequence of this natural equality of men and women is their reliance to each other, expressed through marriage and family.

The New Testament not only repeats the message of the Old Testament with regards to equality and interdependence, but it affirms it as an historical fact. By interpreting the Old Testament message, Jesus Christ reminded Pharisees that God created humanity from the beginning as male and female in order for two to become one (*Matt. 19: 4-6*). Jesus' message was not confined

to marital life, but to the broader strata of the Jewish society. The biblical fables of the Samaritan woman, whom Jesus Christ asks for drink (*John* 4: 1-26) and of the Canaanite woman, who begged Jesus to heal her daughter (*Matt.* 15:21–28), point to the multi-faceted oppression of women in ancient Israel, as well as to the liberating capacity of the new Christian religion. However, these stories reveal the traditional hierarchal order of Jewish society and Jesus' role as emancipator of women discriminated on gender and ethnic grounds, but also that these acts of liberation of discriminated women led to the transformation of both the privileged and discriminated. The new religion brings a transformative impact to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles or between apostles and neophytes as oppositions confined to these times, as well as to the general oppositions between chastity and adultery, lord and servant, man and woman and finally, God and human being.

These two authorities that are behind the writing of the Church Fathers, namely the ancient philosophical tradition and the Judeo-Christian religious belief, were often contrasted, as it is in regard to the question of the status of women in the ancient society. Although it is very common to describe early Christian authors in patriarchal terms, they were quite critical of the autocratic authority exercised by *patres familias* in the Greco-Roman world. However, this does not mean that the Church Fathers were always free from the stereotypes that existed in the world of late antiquity.

The four articles gathered here together within the topic 'Patristics and Gender' go beyond the time of Jesus Christ and his apostles and they cover the period from the second to the the seventh century. The articles also go beyond the topic of Christian marriage, dealing either with strategies for the symbolic construction of women or with the question of the status of the sexual and gender differences in the human primordial state as well as in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The article of Vladimir Cvetković is an overview of how the patristic authors in three different periods addressed the issue of gender. Cvetković argues that in the first pre-Constantinian period of Christian Church characterized by frequent persecutions of Christians, the imperative for both male and female martyrs was to behave 'manly' at the moment of their violent death, as it is described in the accounts of these prosecutions known as martyrologies. The second period, which Cvetković analyzes, pertains to the fourth century when the Christian Church gained freedom and the way to witness Christian faith is displayed no longer through martyrdom but through ascetic life. By relying on the account of Macrina the Younger, Cvetković demonstrates how virginity as the highest Christian norm proliferated new gender roles for women. Finally, Cvetković maintains that authors such as Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus the Confessor developed the model of erotic attraction between loving persons by which one person learns how to die for himself and to live for another person.

The point of departure of Maria Munkholt Christensen's article is the Socratic ideal of practicing death already in this life. Munkholt Christensen applies the

Socratic ideal to Christian women from the fourth and the fifth centuries, who reconciled in their philosophy the Platonic body-soul dichotomy and longing for transcendence with the Christian message of sacrifice. The author points to three different strategies of associating classical with Christian philosophy: replacing ancient philosophy with Christian, or particularly biblical tradition, like in the *Life of Macrina*; integrating elements of Platonic wisdom into the overall biblical world-view, like in the *Life of Marcella*; and inserting the Platonic heritage into Christian literature without pointing to Platonic sources, like in the *Life of Syncretica*. Finally, Munkholt Christensen argues that three Christian women – Macrina, Marcella and Syncretica – are united in their attitude towards gender and death. They freed their own souls from a life defined by their female sex and they were passionless and fearless on the brink of death.

The articles of Sotiris Mitralaxis and Emma Brown Dewhurst are complementary, because their readings of the seventh-century Byzantine author Maximus the Confessor go into the same direction of interpreting sexual and gender differences as nonessential human properties.

Sotiris Mitralaxis points to an ambiguity in Maximus the Confessor's *Ambiguum 41* as to whether the distinction of the sexes was intended by God or whether it is a product of the Fall. Mitralaxis argues that according to Maximus' own exposition the properties of being male or female are not included in the human *logos*, meaning that they were not originally properties of human nature. As the sexual differences were not included in the original plan they will be also according to Mitralaxis omitted in the eschatological state. Mitralaxis points that Maximus' stance about the genderless *logos* of humanity is interpreted nowadays in several directions: as unusual but fully compatible with the patristic mainstream, as advocating marriage between a man and a woman, and as endorsing gender fluidity, transgenderism and same-sex relationships. Although for Mitralaxis the looking for a solution for the nowadays gender issues at a seventh-century author is anachronistic, also the literal readings of Maximus' text that overlooks its potential implications for today's world would be erroneous.

The final article of Emma Brown Dewhurst is also focused on Maximus the Confessor's *Ambiguum 41*. Similarly to Mitralaxis, Brown Dewhurst characterizes properties of being a male or a female as not intrinsic to original human nature, but rather being the modes of existence, introduced to human nature after the Fall, as means of reproduction. Brown Dewhurst further argues that in spite of the usefulness of this mode of existence in the present age, it will be removed in the eschaton, because the physical reproduction would not occur in the future age. However, Brown Dewhurst went further than other Maximian scholars in claiming that the differences between sexes will not only be removed in a metaphorical manner, but that this removal will also include the elimination of bodily sexual characteristics. Brown Dewhurst identifies the sexual differences and division with human gnostic and proairetic wills, as well as with the passions, that were introduced into human life as the consequence of the Fall, but also as instruments to bring people into line with a holy way of living.