

LITURGY, NUPTIALITY, AND THE INTEGRITY OF COSMIC ORDER: SYMBOLIC ONTOLOGY AND FEMINISM

• David L. Schindler •

“The problem of our time...originates in the loss of the inherently ‘symbolic’ dimension of the creaturely order of things and persons.”



The debate over secularism—over what it is and the sense in which it is a good or a bad thing—evidently hinges on the nature of the distinction between religion and the secular (God and the world, the Church and the world).

Presuming not at all to deal with the full range of issues evoked here, my proposal is that secularism in the “bad” sense, at least as found in Western (e.g, American) liberal patterns of thought and life, consists above all in a (false) abstraction from God in our first and most basic understanding of the world: secularism consists in an abstract notion of the cosmos—of its space, time, matter, motion, bodies, and persons.

Put negatively: our understanding of the cosmos becomes abstract in the objectionable sense insofar as it is inadequately

integrated into what may be called the liturgical and indeed nuptial and Marian dimension of the mystery of being. Put positively: it is in their dynamic-destined integration into liturgy, in and through the nuptial love revealed in Mary, hence in the “symbolism” implied by these, that the cosmos—space and time and matter and motion and bodies and persons—realize their original and deepest meaning as such: that is, *as secular*.

The purpose of this article is to give a preliminary indication of the meaning of some of the key terms of this proposal. I will proceed by discussing in turn: the “sacramental”-symbolic meaning of the cosmos as disclosed in liturgy, nuptiality, and Mary, as interpreted especially in the work of Alexander Schmemmann (I–II); Mary and the meaning of a “symbolic” ontology, or ontological “symbolism” (III–VI); and issues in (American) “feminism” (VII).

I

(1) Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann, in his *For the Life of the World*, defines secularism as “above all a *negation of worship*.”¹

It is the negation of man as a worshiping being, as *homo adorans*: the one for whom worship is the essential act which both “posits” his humanity and fulfills it. It is the rejection as ontologically and epistemologically “decisive,” of the words which “always, everywhere and for all” were the true “epiphany” of man’s relation to God, to the world and to himself: “It is meet and right to sing of Thee, to bless Thee, to praise Thee, to give thanks to Thee, and to worship Thee in every place of Thy dominion . . .” (118).

What is crucial here, says Schmemmann, is that we see that “the very notion of worship implies a certain idea of man’s relationship not only to God *but also to the world*” (emphasis added); and that we see also that it is “the idea of worship that secularism explicitly or implicitly rejects” (119).

¹Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998 [1963]), 118.

(2) (a) Schmemmann's argument hinges on what he calls the *sacramental*, or indeed "symbolic," character of the world—that is, of space and time and matter and body and motion—and of the human being's place in the world (cf. 120; 139). Worldly realities find their true meaning precisely as worldly—or, if I may use the term, as "natural"—in their character simultaneously and intrinsically as epiphanies of God. Schmemmann, in this book and again in his recently published *Journals*,² stresses how Christian theology, by virtue of a certain long-standing understanding of "sacrament," and of the relation between the "natural" and the "supernatural," has itself contributed to draining the world of its structurally "symbolic" character (and this notwithstanding what is often an intense piety in other respects). He explains thus:

At the end of the twelfth century a Latin theologian, Berengarius of Tours, was condemned for his teaching on the Eucharist. He maintained that because the presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements is "mystical" or "symbolic," it is not *real* (128).

Unfortunately, he says, the Lateran Council which condemned him largely reversed the formula:

It proclaimed that since Christ's presence in the Eucharist is *real*, it is not "mystical." What is truly decisive here is precisely the disconnection and the opposition of the two terms *verum* and *mystice*, the acceptance, on both sides, that they are mutually exclusive (128–29).

The consequent assumption is that

that which is "mystical" or "symbolic" is not real, whereas that which is "real" is not symbolic. This was, in fact, the collapse of the fundamental Christian *mysterion*, the antinomial "holding together" of the reality of the symbol, and the symbolism of reality. It was the collapse of the fundamental Christian understanding of creation in terms of its ontological *sacramentality* (129).

²*The Journals of Alexander Schmemmann 1973–1983*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000).

Since then, Christian thought has continued the tendency “to oppose these terms, to reject, implicitly or explicitly, the ‘symbolic realism’ and the ‘realistic symbolism’ of the Christian world view. . . . [T]he world ceases to be the ‘natural’ sacrament of God, and the supernatural sacrament ceases to have any ‘continuity’ with the world” (129). “[B]y denying the world its natural ‘sacramentality,’ and radically opposing the ‘natural’ to the ‘supernatural,’ [this dualistic tendency] make[s] the world *grace-proof*, and ultimately lead[s] to *secularism*” (130). (Schmemmann’s argument here echoes and explicitly appeals to that made by Henri de Lubac, especially in his *Corpus Mysticum*).

(2) (b) Schmemmann summarizes as follows what he means by the “ontological *sacramentality*” of the world:

We need water and oil, bread and wine in order to be in communion with God and to know Him. Yet conversely—and such is the teaching, if not of our modern theological manuals, at least of the liturgy itself—it is this communion with God by means of “matter” that reveals the true meaning of “matter,” i.e., of the world itself. We can only worship in time, yet it is worship that ultimately not only reveals the meaning of time, but truly “renews” time itself. There is no worship without the participation of the body, without words and silence, light and darkness, movement and stillness—yet it is in and through worship that all these essential expressions of man in his relation to the world are given their ultimate “term” of reference, revealed in their highest and deepest meaning.

Thus the term “sacramental” means that for the world to be means of worship and means of grace is not accidental, but the revelation of its meaning, the restoration of its essence, the fulfillment of its destiny. It is the “natural sacramentality” of the world that finds expression in worship and makes the latter the essential ἔργον of man, the foundation and the spring of his life and activities as man. Being the epiphany of God, worship is thus the epiphany of the world; being communion with God, it is the only true communion with the world; being knowledge of God, it is the ultimate fulfillment of all human knowledge (121).

In sum, for Schmemmann the movement toward God in Christ (through the Church, by the Holy Spirit) is not something tacked on, as it were, to a space and time and matter originally constituted on their own and in abstraction from this movement. On the

contrary, the movement toward God in Christ lies at the core of space and time and matter in their original constitution, and hence in their original meaning precisely *as* space and *as* time and *as* matter.³

(3) (a) It is important to see that the “continuity” of the Christian *leitourgia* with the whole of man’s “natural” worship and indeed with what Schmemmann terms the “ontological *sacramentality*” of creation “includes in itself an equally essential principle of *discontinuity*” (122). To use my own language, the orders of redemption (Church) and of creation (world, cosmos) remain essentially distinct; but the pertinent point emphasized by Schmemmann is that the Church and the cosmos are nonetheless still brought into being *from their beginning with the same ontological end* (cf. Col. 1: 15–18; *Gaudium et Spes*, 22; John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 50). Hence, although the world, as distinct from the Church, is not (yet) a sacrament in the proper sense, it remains dynamically (finally) ordered, precisely in its original ontological creatureliness, (from and) toward sacrament in the proper sense.

The “sacramental” or “symbolic” nature of the world-cosmos presupposes this simultaneous—paradoxical—continuity within discontinuity of the Church-sacrament and the world.

(3) (b) Schmemmann emphasizes how the discontinuity between sacrament and world is intensified by the world’s rejection of “its own destiny and fulfillment” (122). Thus he says that,

if the basis of all Christian worship is the Incarnation, its true content is always the Cross and the Resurrection. Through these events the new life in Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is “hid with Christ in God,” and made into a life “not of this world.” The

³See Psalm 104; the Canticle of Daniel 3:52–90. See also Emile Mersch, *Morale et Corps Mystique*, 4th ed. (Brussels: Desclée de Brouwer, 1955): “Every being in itself and through its structure is a limitless submission. It is created; that is to say, its very existence, being a relation, is a dependence and a homage. The universe is only cult and religion But, it must be carefully noted, [the] ordinary sense [of religion] runs the risk of dwarfing the real meaning. Religion is not merely a human phenomenon; it is but the new and infinitely more elevated expression taken in us by a manner of being which is necessarily the manner of being of all things. So, the different aspects which it assumes in us are in continuity with the constitution of the universe” (28).

world which rejected Christ must itself die in man if it is to become again means of communion, means of participation in the life which shone forth from the grave, in the Kingdom which is not “of this world,” and which in terms of this world is still to come (122).

Hence his summary conclusion:

It is only because the Church’s *leitourgia* is always cosmic, i.e., assumes into Christ all creation, and is always historical, i.e., assumes into Christ all time, that it can therefore also be eschatological, i.e., make us true participants of the Kingdom to come.

Such then is the idea of man’s relation to the world implied in the very notion of worship. Worship is by definition and act a reality with cosmic, historical, and eschatological dimensions, the expression thus not merely of “piety,” but of an all-embracing “world view” (123).

Thus, to resume the problem of secularism: “[a] modern secularist quite often accepts the idea of God. What, however, he emphatically negates is precisely the sacramentality of man and the world” (124).

II

(1) (a) Elsewhere in *For the Life of the World*, Schmemmann indicates the centrality of the nuptial relation, or indeed the sacrament of matrimony, in understanding the biblical God’s relation in Christ to the world—that is, in and through the Church (84)—and in turn the liturgical relation of the world to God. Schmemmann suggests that, provided we understand this nuptial mystery in its properly theological terms (in terms of the relation between Christ and the Church), we can see that it bears “cosmic and universal dimensions,” indeed, reveals itself “as the all-embracing mystery of being itself” (82). The cosmic dimension of the liturgical-nuptial love emphasized here by Schmemmann is in my opinion captured nicely by what Pope John Paul II terms the “nuptial attribute” of the (human) body.⁴ The notion of

⁴John Paul II, “The Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis,” in *The Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997), 25–102, at 61. In this notion of the body as nuptial, we see the root of the pope’s

“nuptiality,” or “nuptial body,” entails—in light of the foregoing—that the space, time, matter, and motion ingredient in the body somehow themselves already, in their original structure as space, time, matter, and motion, bear an aptness for (sacramental-nuptial) love.

(1) (b) Schmemmann emphasizes the link of the sacrament of matrimony, not with an “abstract theology of love,” but with “the one who has always stood at the very heart of the Church’s life as the purest expression of human love and response to God—Mary, the Mother of Jesus” (83).

[I]n her love and obedience, in her faith and humility, [Mary] accepted to be what from all eternity all creation was meant and created to be: the temple of the Holy Spirit, the *humanity* of God. She accepted to give her body and blood—that is, her whole life—to be the body and blood of the Son of God, to be *mother* in the fullest and deepest sense of this world, giving her life to the Other and fulfilling her life in Him. She accepted the only true nature of each creature and all creation: to place the meaning and, therefore, the fulfillment of her life in God.

In accepting this nature she fulfilled the *womanhood* of creation. This word will seem strange to many. In our time the Church, following the modern trend toward the “equality of the sexes,” uses only one-half of the Christian revelation about man and woman, the one which affirms that in Christ there is neither “male nor female” (Gal. 3:28). The other half is ascribed again to an antiquated world view. In fact, however, all our attempts to find the “place of woman” in society (or in the Church) instead of exalting her, belittle woman, for they too often imply a denial of her specific vocation.

Yet is it not significant that the relation between God and the world, between God and Israel, His chosen people, and finally between God and the cosmos restored in the Church, is expressed in the Bible in terms of marital union and love? . . . This means that the world . . . is the bride of God and that in sin this fundamental relationship has been broken, distorted. And it is in Mary—the Woman, the Virgin, the Mother—in her response to God, that the Church has its living and personal beginning.

rejection of the “physicalist” or “biologicistic” moral theories that view the body as simply “pre-moral.” See also here *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 50, on the “cosmic-flesh” implications of the Incarnation.

This response is total obedience in love; not obedience *and* love, but the wholeness of the one as the totality of the other (83–4).

Schmemmann goes on:

[I]n the “natural” world, the bearer of this obedient love, of this love as response, is the woman. . . . This acceptance is not passivity, blind submission, because it is love, and love is always active. It gives life to the proposal of man, fulfills it as life, yet it becomes fully love and fully life only when it is fully *acceptance* and *response*. This is why the whole creation, the whole Church—and not only women—find the expression of their response and obedience to God in Mary the Woman, and rejoice in her. She stands for all of us For man can be truly man—that is, . . . the priest and minister of God’s creativity and initiative—only when he does not posit himself as the “owner” of creation and submits himself—in obedience and love—to its nature as the bride of God, in *response* and *acceptance* (85).

Indeed, recalling the tradition that refers to Mary as the “new Eve,” Schmemmann locates the first Eve’s sin precisely in her failure “to be a woman” (85). That is, in words that are bound to “scandalize” today, and which will be treated in sustained fashion below, Schmemmann says that Eve “took the initiative” and thereby—paradoxically—“made herself, and also the man whose ‘eve’ she was, the slaves of her ‘femininity’”: she was now to be “ruled over,” “possessed,” and made into an “instrument of procreation” by man (85). The first Eve, then, contrasts exactly with Mary, who, in her “*fiat*,” in obedient love and loving obedience, awaited “the initiative of the Other” (86).

The light of an eternal spring comes to us when on the day of annunciation we hear the decisive: “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done unto me according to thy Word” (Lk 1:38). This is the whole creation, all of humanity, and each one of us recognizing the words that express our ultimate nature and being, our acceptance to be the bride of God . . . (86).

III

Needless to say, and as already suggested, the terms of Schmemmann’s argument here are hard and controversial in our

contemporary cultural setting. My proposal, however, is that this is so above all because of the long tradition in the West that has generated and continued to sustain an abstract notion of the cosmos, a tradition that, as we have seen, has its origin in a decisive sense in Christian theology itself. The crucial point, again, is that it is a secularizing tendency within Christian theology itself (as indicated by Schmemmann, and by de Lubac and indeed Hans Urs von Balthasar)⁵ that has led in decisive ways to the failure to see that the cosmos is destined for holiness, precisely in its original-constitutive order.⁶

The core of the problem is a theology, and in turn an ontology, an anthropology, and a cosmology, from which the liturgy, nuptiality, and Mary have been originally abstracted—that is *separated*. Given this separation, any relationality that entails the asymmetry indicated in obedience and (feminine) responsiveness can (rightly) appear now to be little more than a “romantic” or “moralistic,” not to say arbitrary and even dehumanizing, *imposition* on “reality.” This, in a word, is the consequence of the dualism between “sacrament” and “world” (or, in de Lubac’s and Balthasar’s terms, between nature and the supernatural, between theology [intelligent order] and sanctity) discussed above. By definition, this dualism, from the side of both the Church and the world, makes these features entailed in liturgy, nuptiality, and Mary into “private,” “pietistic,” “positivistic” matters from which the realism of the cosmic order of things has always-already been removed.

Here, then, is the overarching point: continued or renewed insistence (e.g., by Christians) on a piety that is without an intrinsically liturgical, nuptial, and Marian sense of *cosmic-cultural order* is in the end little more helpful in resolving the crisis of our time than is continued insistence (e.g., by “secularists”) on an order that is not intrinsically oriented toward (and from) a liturgical, nuptial, and Marian *piety*. For, again, the precise point is that moralistic-

⁵Regarding Balthasar, see for example his “Theologie und Heiligkeit,” in *Verbum Caro* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1960), 195–225 (“Theology and Sanctity,” in *The Word Became Flesh* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 181–209): which discusses the (growing) divorce (beginning in the epoch following St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure) between the *order* of things (of intelligence and the cosmos)—as revealed in and through the Church—and the *life of piety* (cf. the *devotio moderna*).

⁶See also Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), which makes this case in a more “Rahnerian” manner.

voluntaristic *piety* and formalistic-mechanistic *order* are but different expressions of the same abstract understanding of the cosmos that lies at the source of current difficulties.

This is what is meant by the suggestion, following Schmemmann (and de Lubac and Balthasar) that the problem of our time, as it affects both religion and secularity, originates in the loss of the inherently “symbolic” dimension of the creaturely order of things and persons. The task of Christians today is thus to recover an ontology bearing an intrinsic openness to liturgy, nuptiality, and Mary (“symbolic” ontology); and simultaneously to understand liturgy, nuptiality, and Mary in their full ontological (anthropological, cosmological) meaning (ontological “symbolism”). The task is to recover an *ontological sense* of the *relation* between the one and the Other disclosed in liturgy, nuptiality, and Mary.

IV

But we need now to define more precisely what is meant by “symbolic,” and indeed to show how Mary, in her concrete historical reality as Virgin-Mother of God, reveals the deepest meaning of “symbolic.” And we need to show further how this symbolic ontology meets some of the serious issues of our age, for example, those raised by “feminism.”

(1) Regarding the symbolic character of created being: in light of the above, I take this to mean that being is always a being-*with* that presupposes a *mutual but asymmetrical relation between the one and the Other*.

(2) This relation that structures creaturely being has its archetype in Mary—not Mary as an “accidental” occasion or illustration, but rather as the unique mother of the unique Son of God, who, precisely as such, is herself (i.e., as the second Eve) the singular “symbol” from and toward which history (being) has its proper “symbolic” meaning. Mary, in her concrete *fiat* and *magnificat* and in her unique reality as *theotokos*, bears the destined meaning of the created universe already in its original creaturely order (i.e., in the one concrete order of history).

In sum, the symbolic nature of creaturely being signifies the original character of being *as simultaneously-asymmetrically a being-given*

(created being=being-as-gift); and the singular historical person, thus Mary of Nazareth, is the one in whom the meaning of this being-as-gift is first and most fully (archetypically) realized.⁷ It will suffice in the present forum to present schematically some main implications of these assertions relative to what was identified in my subtitle as our problematic “culture of abstraction.”

(3) As already indicated throughout the foregoing discussion, the term “abstraction” signals an absence, or inadequate sense, of *relation*—that is, of relation in its original (theological-ontological) asymmetrical meaning. This inadequate sense of relation has typically taken the form in modern Western culture of an emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom, initiative and creativity, self-determination, self-reflexivity, and indeed self-love: all of these taken to indicate the dignity and worth of the individual human person. My proposal presupposes that all of the features noted here are essential to any adequate understanding of creaturely being. It is emphatically true that, without individual initiative and autonomy and the other features noted, creatures would not and could not, finally, have any genuine dignity. The intention of my proposal is not at all to deny this, but on the contrary “simply” to insist that we need to insert an *asymmetrical* “with” within the original structure of creaturely initiative and autonomy (freedom, self-determination, self-love and so on)—an asymmetrical “with” whose meaning is disclosed to us symbolically, in the manner realized finally and most properly in liturgy, nuptiality, and Mary.

Our task, then, is both to indicate what this means, and to show how this symbolic rendering of creaturely initiative and autonomy in the end recuperates initiative and autonomy—indeed precisely “magnifies” these—albeit *while transforming the basic meaning typically given them in the West*.

⁷Of course, in another sense, Jesus Christ, the child of God, the “first-born of creatures” (Col. 1:15), is the one in whom being-as-gift is first and most properly revealed. And yet, in the “economic” order, since the “permission” (free “*fiat*”) of a woman is the anterior condition for the incarnation of the Son of God, her “nuptiality” takes a certain precedence (even) over Christ’s “filiality” in this order. However, it is beyond our purposes to sort out thematically here this question of the relative priority of “nuptiality” and “filiality” in the basic revelation of (creaturely) being-as-gift.

Let me begin by recalling what was said above regarding Mary. Mary lets God be (effective) in her (*fiat*); she herself magnifies God, becoming effective—simultaneously albeit “subordinately”—*with* God (*magnificat*); and this simultaneous mutual but asymmetrical relation with God (i.e., this “nuptial” relation) is fruitful—it results in Mary’s unique (virginal) motherhood of the Son of God (*theotokos*).

Key here is the intrinsic link between Mary’s *magnificat* and her becoming the *theotokos* on the one hand, and her utterance of the *fiat* on the other. That is, we need to see the (“perichoretic”) unity among these *that is coincident with the order that begins with the fiat*. Mary’s *fiat* expresses the *response* that reveals God’s *initiative* as *gift*. As a consequence (ontological, not temporal) of this (obedient, contemplative–active) response, she *shares immediately* in this *initiative-gift*. That is, she becomes a giver *simultaneously in-(subordination to)-and-with* the divine Giver: she magnifies the Lord, and immediately begins herself to be magnified in and with the Lord. Mary becomes what, on her own, she was not: a mother, the co-creator of new life. Indeed, she becomes the co-creator of the divine-incarnate Son of God himself.

All of this is richly expressed in the Gospel of Luke:

“Behold, I am the handmaid [δούλη] of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word” (Lk 1:38).

“Blessed [εὐλογημένη] are you among women, and blessed is the fruit [ὁ καρπός] of your womb!” (Lk 1:42).

“My soul magnifies [μεγαλύνει] the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has regarded the low estate [ταπεινώσιν] of his handmaiden. For behold, all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me [ἐποίησέν μοι μεγάλα ὁ δυνατός], and holy is his name. . . . He has shown his strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud [ὑπερφάνους] in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty [δυνάστας] from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away” (Lk 1:46–53).

Mary, as interpreted in these texts, reveals archetypically at least three features indicating the original symbolic–nuptial structure of creaturely being. To use the language of ontology, Mary reveals

the original and abiding asymmetry in the creature's relation to God (*fiat*); she reveals the (ontologically) *consequent-but-simultaneous* mutuality in that (asymmetrical) relation (*magnificat*); and she reveals the (inherent) fruitfulness of this asymmetrical-mutual relation (*theotokos*). To be sure, Mary reveals these in a singular way, utterly unlike that of any other creature: her responsiveness is sinless—wholly transparent to God's initiative; her mutuality with God involves a literal unity with the divine person (Son of God) within her; and her fruitfulness consists literally in giving birth (“co-creating”) the divine Son of God himself. My assumption (with, e.g., Schmemmann and Pope John Paul II, among others) is that Mary nonetheless is archetypical for creaturely being. God offers to all creatures, in grace and from the beginning of their existence, a genuine share in what takes place uniquely in Mary.

Presupposing this “analogy” (real unity within [greater] difference) between Mary and all other creatures, our proposal is that the symbolic-nuptial structure of creaturely being—that is, the peculiar “with” that structures the creature—signifies an asymmetrical-mutual relationality that is inherently creative and fruitful. To put it in a word, Mary reveals to us the paradox that it is precisely *in subordination to* the Other that one *assumes the power of* (with) the Other that enables one to be *genuinely creative and fruitful in a way utterly beyond what one can create or produce on one's own* (i.e., to be creative and powerful in some significant sense with the generativity and power of God himself).⁸

V

What, then, does all this imply with respect to the original meaning of the initiative and autonomy and self-determination that are proper to the creature?

⁸I should perhaps add here, for greater precision and completeness: it doesn't suffice to say merely that the creature participates subordinately in God's “power.” For the point (left implicit here) is that God's power *itself* includes an asymmetrically different “subordination,” insofar as he brings about, and at that instant *presupposes* what he brings about as a factor in then giving a *more*, a *plus* beyond even the original gift. Cf. the discussion in (4) (a) in the text.

The urgency of this question is already clear from what was said above about the (rightful) emphasis on these features in contemporary thought and culture. But the urgency is of course intensified when, as indicated above in Schmemmann's reference to the "*womanhood* of creation," we assign the "subordination" implied in asymmetry primarily to the feminine. In a word, the "subordinate" asymmetry indicated in the symbolic-nuptial structure of creaturely being is seen by many both to threaten any genuine *partnership* between the creature and God in carrying on the work of creation, and, further, insofar as this asymmetry is disclosed first in reference to women, also to undercut any genuine *equality* between men and women. How does our interpretation of Mary above help to address the quite legitimate concerns voiced here? Again, given the limits of the present forum, we can answer this question only schematically.

Perhaps it is best to begin by (re-)stating the obvious: namely, that the only adequate way, finally, to deal with the concerns raised is to go to the heart of what it means for a creature to be and to act. And the crucially relevant point in this connection is to see that, for a creature, being-a-self (or indeed, as it were, being "in" or "from myself": i.e., being an individual substance or thing) is constitutively-also (from the beginning and all along the way) a *being-given-by-Another*, hence a *being-from-Another*; and to see consequently that creaturely individual initiative and autonomy (freedom, creativity, self-determination, self-love, and so on) are *originally and constitutively gifts-by-and-from-Another*. The paradox here is fundamental and ineliminable. All of the "things" dear to myself—my individual autonomy and singular freedom and creativity, and so on—are due, originally and constitutively, to the effective presence of the Other, or again the Other's being effectively present, in me. The paradox, then, consists in the fact that the "*self-centeredness*" implied in individual autonomy and freedom, self-determination, self-love, and creativity remains in place, but with a transformed meaning, such that it is at its core—also and *more profoundly ontologically*—an *Other-centeredness*.

The "asymmetrical-mutual with" at the heart of the self, then, signifies a relation of the self to the Other that grants absolute primacy to the Other even as it simultaneously includes a *relative* primacy of the self within that absolute primacy. The self-centeredness characteristic of (legitimate) autonomy and the like is retained *even as it is turned on its head*. In short, the *creaturely self*,

precisely as its *own individual self*, is *constitutively-also* and *more profoundly a reference to Another*.

All that I want to say concerning the recuperation of the self's initiative and autonomy is expressed in the paradox indicated here. The neuralgic point is that this initiative and autonomy (freedom, creativity, self-determination) are genuinely recuperated, but only and at once *in reference to Another*. Creaturely initiative always and everywhere bears within it *a relation to the Other* that makes that initiative—from the beginning and all along the way—an initiative *from-, in-, and with-the Other*: makes creaturely initiative originally and constitutively symbolic and nuptial.

But further, and the point is decisive, this original creaturely initiative, which is always an initiative-in-reference-to-Another, just so far becomes creative and powerful beyond what is possible for it on its own: beyond what individual initiative is capable of *without* the creativity and power of the Other. In sum, as already stated above, creaturely initiative, in its symbolic-nuptial understanding, becomes creative and powerful in some significant sense with the generativity and power of God himself.⁹

Let me now note briefly some important implications of these general assertions.

VI

(1) Perhaps most fundamentally, the constitutive “addition” of (asymmetrical-mutual) reference to Another in the original meaning of creaturely initiative entails a (re-)definition of that meaning in terms of a primacy of love, of beauty, and of drama.

⁹Again, recalling the previous footnote, it may be useful to emphasize that it is not a question here simply of a shared power (in the creature) vs. “sheer” power (in God). Rather, God’s “sheer” power is *also* affected (without loss of integrity!) by its being-shared. The *fruit* is more than what the creature can do alone and, *in a certain sense*, more than what God does alone. The fruit is the fruit of the gift as one with the Giver *in* its (the gift’s) *givenness*. For a helpful discussion (and abundant sources) pertinent to the issue raised here, cf. Gerard O’Hanlon’s *The Immutability of God in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Love signals the *relationality* that is constitutive of creaturely initiative. Relationality is something always-already immanent within and anterior to creaturely initiative and not something first (*simply*) effected by creaturely initiative. *Beauty* signals the (mutual) *asymmetry* in this relationality. Beauty indicates the primacy of the Other *as* Other, of the Other thus in inherent (absolute) attractiveness, in a way that is always-already inclusive of the (relative) attractiveness of the self. *Drama* signals the irreducible *polarity* in the creature's original relationality with God. Drama indicates the intended simultaneous (albeit always asymmetrical) deepening of the participatory *and* the creative character of the creature's initiative in relation to God.

(2) Power (ownership, control, possession, property [*proprius*]). Most basically, creaturely power begins in wonder and gratitude, before the inherent beauty of the Other. The power of creaturely being originates and consists primarily in the beauty of the Other: it is *the attractiveness of the Other become effective in me* (the self). The paradox indicated here is staggering. Creaturely power begins in and presupposes all along the way precisely "littleness" (δούλη, ταπεινώσις), but the pertinent point is that this "littleness" turns immediately into genuine power (δυνατός): it does so by virtue of the beauty that is made effective *in me* (and immediately—also now *with me and through me*) paradoxically by that very "littleness" (by the "littleness" that constitutes me as a "handmaid," one whose being is structurally "subordinate" to the Other).¹⁰ What this implies, further, is that the creature becomes powerful—in the authentic loving sense—precisely through obedience (which, the foregoing makes clear, is thus ontological before it is moral), and through contemplation and "confession" (i.e., through the transparency of the self before the Other—"confession" as the fundamental way of [creaturely] being: Adrienne von Speyr).

(3) Here, then, we can see the intrinsic link between creaturely power and the poor and vulnerable ones of the

¹⁰Once again: "littleness" simultaneously guarantees and transforms the meaning of *creaturely power*, *and*, in so doing, *also* reveals the authentic nature of God's power as including "kenosis"—again, without loss of integrity (cf. fns. 8 and 9 above).

Gospel—those who are exalted in Mary’s *Magnificat* and in the “Beatitudes.” And we can see as well the original and deepest meaning of creaturely-cosmic “liberation” (“Mary is totally dependent upon God and completely directed towards him, and, at the side of her Son, she is *the most perfect image of freedom and of the liberation* of humanity and of the universe. It is to her as Mother and Model that the Church must look in order to understand in its completeness the meaning of her own mission”: *Redemptoris Mater*, 37).

Authentic liberation, in other words, begins in the *fiat*, and is intrinsically ordered to the power of the *Magnificat* that enables the vulnerable and the poor, the weak and the suffering, to become themselves creative and powerful precisely *with the power of God*—which is to say, with the power of a love that is (intended to be) inclusive-transformative of the poor and the vulnerable in the whole of their embodied, cosmic-cultural reality. Here is indicated the relevant criticism of the “worldly” liberations of both the left (cf. the socialism which, lacking the depth-giving patience [not passivity] of Mary, would liberate economic-political structures precipitously-“violently,” through external [and just so far “super-ficial”] manipulation); and the right (cf. the neoliberal capitalism which, lacking the same Marian patience as a matter of original creaturely *order*, invariably inclines toward the “commodifying” and “moralizing” of economic-political liberation).

(4) To conclude this section, let me indicate at least three ways in which the argument of IV, V, and VI needs to be developed further.

(a) First of all, we need to show the sense in which what we have termed the liturgical-nuptial nature of creaturely being begins already in the Trinity itself: that is, in the relations that are constitutive of the three divine persons among themselves. I have in mind here, for example, the asymmetry-mutuality involved in the divine sonship (incarnated in Jesus); the “worship”-glorification of the Father contained in Jesus’ expression of “Abba”;¹¹ the Spirit’s

¹¹Cf., inter alia, Joseph Ratzinger, “Kommentar zum I. Kapitel” [*Gaudium et Spes*, Articles 11–22], in *Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche*, ed. H. Vorgrimler et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 1968), 14: 313–54; idem, *Einführung in das Christentum* (Munich:

giving what he has received from the Father and the Son;¹² and so on.

Indeed, it cannot be stressed enough here, in light of all we have written: the (inadequate) sense of autonomy indicated in the dualisms between sacrament–Church and world, nature and the supernatural, and theological–intelligent order and piety criticized by Schmemmann (de Lubac, Balthasar) *has its ultimate root in a failure to integrate our (philosophical-rational) understanding of God as Actus Purus from the beginning into God as a trinitarian unity of persons*. The consequence of this failure, in other words, is a sense of act (*esse*) in its most original (philosophical) sense as *unitary* in structure; while the consequence of the indicated integration is a sense of act in its most original sense rather as always–already bearing within it an asymmetrical “with.” Again, it is this asymmetrical “with” (unity–within–asymmetrical difference; asymmetrical difference–within–unity) within God himself that indicates the original (analogical) meaning of liturgy, worship, “nuptiality” (i.e., mutual albeit asymmetrical “subordination”), “*fiat*,” “*magnificat*,” “*theotokos*,” “*kenosis*,” “littleness” or “handmaid–ship” (δοῦλη), and the patience that, given sin, becomes “suffering” in the economic order—all of these without loss of precisely infinite integrity, and thus consistent with immutability in the deepest sense.¹³

Kösel Verlag, 1968).

¹²Cf. inter alia, Marc Ouellet, “The Spirit in the Life of the Trinity,” *Communio* (American edition), 25 (Summer 1998): 199–213; and David L. Schindler, “Institution and Charism: The Missions of the Son and the Spirit in Church and World,” in *Communio*, (American edition), 25 (Summer 1998): 253–273.

¹³By analogy here I mean a genuine unity coincident with infinite difference (mystery) in these features as predicated of God as distinct from creatures. Cf., in connection with (4) (a), Balthasar, *Theodramatik IV: Das Endspiel* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1983), 53–95. And cf. the discussions and reference in fns. 8, 9, and 10 above; and also David Christopher Schindler, “The Dramatic Structure of Truth, in Dialogue with Hans Urs von Balthasar and Continental Philosophy from Kant to Heidegger” (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2001).

Chiara Lubich offers the following striking words that are basic for the Focolare Movement she co-founded: “In the light of the Trinity, Being reveals itself, if we can say this, as safekeeping in its most inner recesses the non-being of Self-giving; not the non-being which negates Being, but the non-being which reveals Being as Love: *Being which is the three divine Persons*.”

“In the light of Jesus forsaken, the subject, the being of all created things and the absolute Being itself therefore find a new explanation which can re-establish a new

In a word, despite its trinitarian dogma and piety, Western Christianity has left largely intact what may be called a “unitarian” ontology and rationality. And it is the sense of act as originally unitary or “unitarian”—i.e., of act as *lacking an original-structural asymmetry*—that I believe lies at the core of the inadequate sense of autonomy that has prevailed in the (modern) West, and most profoundly defines its secularism.

(b) Secondly, we need to develop the sense of the literal nuptiality of human persons in relation to each other. As John Paul II puts it, “the sexual difference constitutes the very identity of the (human) person.”¹⁴ The point is that all human persons are structured intrinsically as husbands-fathers (e.g., as apt for nuptiality-fatherhood) or as wives-mothers (e.g., as apt for nuptiality-motherhood).¹⁵ And indeed all human persons are structurally children: all human persons are—and in some significant sense always remain—*born from* their parents, *from* God.

Recuperation of *any* of the relations that (partially) constitute human persons requires a recuperation simultaneously of *all* these relations, in a way that follows the original concrete order of things as centered in Christ as the unique revelation of the Father, and as enabled in Mary and the Church by the power of the Holy Spirit. This point seems especially important in view of what is often the tendency today to want to recover one or other of the familial relations—for example, paternity or maternity—in a one-sided fashion. The point, in other words, is that, because and insofar as the human person is originally constituted in a “communion of persons,” and because this original communion of persons is necessarily actualized first (in the created order) as a family (father, mother, child), it follows that any one person/relation in this family (e.g., fatherhood) can be properly understood only (also) in its

philosophy of being” (‘A Philosophy That Stems from Christ,’ *Communio* 25 [Winter, 1998]: 746–756 at 754).

¹⁴Address to the Faculty of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, August, 1999, #4 (*Academic Catalog*, American Session, 2000–2001).

¹⁵This of course is to be understood in terms of the two distinct (but “circumincessively” related) states of life: namely, consecrated virginity and marriage.

“perichoretic” unity (unity-within-distinctness) with the others (e.g., motherhood, filiality)—and vice versa.¹⁶

(c) Finally, we need to recuperate the sense in which the symbolic-nuptial structure of the creature in relation to God holds also, in an intrinsic-analogical sense, for cosmic (i.e., non-rational) entities in their original nature and relations to each other. Such a recuperation indicates, for example, a transformation of Newton’s (abstract) space and time, of Descartes’s (mechanistic) body, and of Francis Bacon’s (primarily external-forceful) causality (physical power);¹⁷ and it indicates also a transformation of the modern science, medicine, and technology that are (insofar as they are) mediated by these notions.¹⁸ The point here of course is not that the mechanical aspects of physical reality are not of fundamental and ineliminable significance; but only that these aspects are themselves, precisely in their mechanical functioning, best understood in terms of the integration into the love, beauty, and drama indicated in the (destined) recapitulation of all things in Christ.

VII

¹⁶Cf. in this connection John Paul II’s “Radiation of Fatherhood” (in Karol Wojtyła, *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987], 333–68), where the meaning of fatherhood is developed (inter alia) in and through the father’s relationship with the mother and the child. Hence Wojtyła’s assertion that “one must choose to give birth even more than to create” (341). And note the substantial place given Mary in John Paul II’s encyclical on God the Father, *Dives in Misericordia*.

¹⁷Cf. in this connection, for example, the important work of recently deceased theoretical physicist David Bohm: *Causality and Chance in Modern Physics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957); *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980); and, published posthumously, with B.J. Hiley, *The Undivided Universe: An Ontological Interpretation of Quantum Theory* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁸Cf. here, for example, George Parkin Grant, *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986). Contrary to most critics of (modern) technology, Grant rightly sees that (modern) technology is already non-neutral in its original structure as such, relative to the nature of a truth integrated into beauty. The question of the value of technology, in other words, does not emerge first “merely” in terms of the moral uses to which it is put.

But let me now illustrate the significance of the foregoing argument in terms of the work of an important figure in American feminism, Elizabeth Johnson, Distinguished Professor of Theology at Fordham University.¹⁹ I will proceed simply by citing several texts at length, since I believe the texts themselves bring effectively into relief the critical issues raised by her work relative to my argument.

In what sense can it be claimed that God has “dimensions,” let alone dualistically conceived dimensions of masculine and feminine? Such an idea extends human division to the godhead itself. It actually ontologizes sex in God, making sexuality a dimension of divine being, rather than respecting the symbolic nature of religious language.²⁰

Mary is a friend of God and a prophet within the communion of saints.²¹

Not just Mary’s vocation but that of every woman—and man—is to partner Holy Wisdom in bringing about the reign of mercy and peaceful justice. Relieved of her historical burden as complement to the patriarchal divine and positively signaling the depth of women’s dignity vis-a-vis God, Mary becomes free to rejoin us in the communion of saints (319).

A second fallacy that has dogged mariology interprets Mary as the ideal woman or the embodiment of the so-called “eternal feminine.” As such, she functions as a role model for all other women. Those who take this approach invariably exaggerate sexual differences between women and men, elevating sex to an ontological principle that results in virtually two types of human

¹⁹I bracket the question here of the variety of meanings accorded feminism in the contemporary situation. There are interesting differences between Elizabeth Johnson (American feminism) and, for example, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva (French feminism), notably regarding the ontological significance of (gender) difference. And Johnson herself scarcely represents the whole of feminism in America (and she surely would not claim this for herself). Nevertheless, she does represent a significant group of American Catholic (feminist) theologians —note, for example, her recent presidency of the Catholic Theological Society of America.

²⁰*She Who Is* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 54.

²¹“Mary, Friend of God and Prophet: A Critical Reading of the Marian Tradition,” *Theology Digest* 47:4 (Winter 2000), 317–325, at 317. This is the annual Aquinas Lecture of the Aquinas Institute of Theology, Saint Louis University, given by Johnson in January, 2000. All subsequent citations in the text are from this lecture.

nature. Masculine nature, characterized by intelligence, assertiveness, independence, and the ability to make decisions, is destined for leadership in the public realm. On the other hand, feminine nature, marked by relationality, gentleness, nurturing, a non-assertive, non-competitive attitude, and the giving of service and reassurance, is fit for the private domain of childbearing, homemaking, and care for the vulnerable.

Hans Urs von Balthasar takes this approach, arguing that in the church there is a Marian principle of holy obedience complementary to the Petrine principle of orderly hierarchical rule. This Marian principle indicates that women ought to divest themselves of self-will in order to be obedient to the word of God as articulated by male authority figures. . . .

Perhaps the most widely-heard proponent of this view is Pope John Paul II. . . . Like Mary, he [says], all women are oriented toward giving love without measure once they have received it. Like Mary, all women are to be mothers, either physically or spiritually (virgins). In Mary, women see mirrored the highest virtues to which they are called, which the Pope delineates as “the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement.”²²

As these examples demonstrate, the notion of Mary as the ideal feminine inevitably leads to the subordination of women and the privileging of men spiritually, psychologically and politically. Much of women’s negative reaction to this image of Mary stems from the realization that this feminine ideal functions as an obstacle to personal growth, preventing the development of a critical intellect, capacity for righteous anger, and other characteristics of a mature personality. Living “femininely” can even be dangerous to one’s health and life, inculcating passivity in abusive and violent situations. The rigid definition of the feminine, when applied to social roles, also blocks women from functioning in the public order, for by nature they are designed for domestic auxiliary roles (319–20).

An adequate theology of Mary for the third millennium must be clear on this point: there is no eternal feminine; there is no objective, essential feminine nature; there is no ideal woman. The very notion of the feminine is a product of patriarchal thinking intended to keep women in their so-called proper “place.” In contrast to dualistic anthropology that so separates head and heart, a liberating view of Mary grows out of an

²²*Redemptoris Mater*, n. 46. Johnson also refers to *Mulieris Dignitatem* in her argument here.

egalitarian anthropology of partnership. In no way does this stance negate differences between women and men, but it refuses to make sex the sole primary marker of personal identity or to use sex to stereotype a person's characteristics. Rather, it affirms that sex combines with race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation; historical, geographical, and social location; and cultural makeup to define each person as unique. We all exist as human persons with multiple differences. Indeed, differences among women as a group can be even greater than differences between some women and some men.

Relieved of the burden of being the ideal feminine woman, Mary can be simply herself. A poor woman singing her *Magnificat* about the downfall of tyrants and full bellies for the hungry, she takes another step toward rejoining us in the communion of saints (320).

Thus Johnson suggests a new understanding of the community of saints based on a "companionship" as distinct from "patron-client" model, whereby those who have died remain "friends and colleagues of the living in one Spirit-filled community" (320–21). Note here, she says, "the mutual give and take that recognizes difference but shares the same call to faithful discipleship" (321). "This is not to say that we no longer call upon saints to pray for us; but this prayer occurs in a context of mutual sharing in the project of the reign of God" (321).

Further on, Johnson takes note of how "Mark's negative view of Jesus' mother and brothers as outside his circle of followers corresponds with the anti-familial ethic of the rest of that Gospel" (321–22). She states that the "annunciation scene is nothing less than a prophetic commissioning on the model of the call to Moses at the burning bush. She gives her assent, thus launching her life on an adventure whose outcome is unknown" (323). Again, regarding the *Magnificat*: "Mary's faith-filled partnership with God in the work of liberation is underscored in her *Magnificat*. . . . Her spirit rejoices in God her savior, for—poor and common woman though she may be—the powerful, living, holy God is doing great things to her and all the poor. . . . This great prayer, a revolutionary song of salvation, reveals Mary as not only full of grace but also of political opinions, socially radical ones at that" (323–24).

Johnson concludes by saying that

[i]t does no honor to reduce [Mary's] faith to a privatized piety or, worse yet, a doting mother-son relationship. . . . Interpreting this Jewish village woman of faith as friend of God and prophet allows her dangerous memory to inspire our own lives. . . . To relate to Miriam of Nazareth as a partner in hope in the company of all the holy women and men who have gone before us; to reclaim the power of her memory for the flourishing of suffering people; . . .—these results of a critical reading of the Marian tradition are of immeasurable benefit. When the Christian community remembers like this, our eyes are opened to sacred visions for a different future” (324).

Given present limits, I restrict myself to two comments in response to Johnson's argument.

(1) First and above all, her argument turns us back to the question of the nature and most proper meaning of creaturely love and indeed of beauty. In terms of our proposal as developed above: how deeply within the structure of the self do we root reference-to-Another, and how are this reference and its implications best to be understood? Johnson's answer, defended in terms of an interpretation of Mary (as was my own argument), is given the name of partnership (Mary “partners Holy Wisdom in bringing about the reign of mercy and peaceful justice”). The term “partnership,” of course, suggests a kind of equality—i.e., simple symmetry—between the partners. And it suggests further a primacy of a certain sort of “autonomy” (cf. the interrelation among the various features of the person privileged by Johnson as marks of the “mature personality” who is apt for the “public” realm: for example, critical intellect, assertiveness, independence, ability to make decisions, righteous anger, and so on).

As already indicated in our earlier argument, these features mentioned by Johnson, insofar as they all signal a basic sense of independence, are surely legitimate indicators of the mature personality. However, this still leaves the question, raised earlier, concerning the basic terms in which this maturity or independence—this legitimate autonomy—is best to be conceived. In scriptural terms, the question concerns the meaning of what is traditionally translated as “handmaid” (δούλη): how does one translate this into a “partner” who is without significant inner “subordination” or indeed “low estate” (ταπεινωσις) (unless one begins by assuming that the “lowliness” indicated literally in the Greek is simply a function of the social-historical conditions of the

time: which assumption of course presupposes exactly what is in dispute—and indeed begs the following question)?²³ In theological-ontological terms, the question concerns the implications of creation *ex nihilo* as understood in Christianity: what does it mean for a being to be in its origin *wholly from-Another* (that is, even as it simultaneously-thereby comes into its *own* being). How are we to understand the rightful autonomy (“self-ownership”) of such a being?

My own answer has been given: the rightful autonomy or independence of the creaturely-human being indicates an “asymmetrical with,” and indeed “subordination,” implicit in the creature’s original and abiding *being-given*: requires, that is, an original and abiding *symbolic* structure.

Evidently, the issue raised here is a difficult one; but it is hardly arcane. What is at stake is the question of how deeply in the human person or self *service* and *gratitude* to the Other, and *wonder* before the (inherent) beauty of the Other—all of which are essential features of love—are to be found. The issue in the end comes down to the question of whether (in what sense) love is something first *given* to the creature (and just so far is present already in the creature’s original structure [*qua being*]), or rather whether love is something first *chosen* or *effected* by the creature.

In short, if I may so put it, it seems to me that what is risked in the idea of a “partnership” that is not innerly qualified, also-and-more-profoundly, by “handmaid-ship” is a slip into a kind of ontological “pelagianism” that removes the *Other-centeredness* that lies at the core of, and accords the original and abiding meaning to, the creature’s rightful *self-centeredness*.²⁴

(2) But, secondly, it is important to see the paradox that emerges here. For it should be clear that the line of criticism introduced with respect to Johnson in fact echoes the criticism offered by Schmemmann, de Lubac, and Balthasar with respect to the

²³Johnson does refer to Mary as a “poor and common woman,” but the relevant point is that “poor and common” are not integrated into the basic meaning she accords to partnership.

²⁴Again, this does not involve self-alienation because there is a gift having an inner order in which self-centeredness is anchored in Another who is so “selfless” as to give me selfhood as a gift to be given—the original meaning, then, of creativity!

secularizing trend within “traditional” theology itself: that is, in the latter’s failure to integrate liturgy, nuptiality, Mary—hence symbolism—sufficiently into its original understanding of cosmic-cultural *order*. Johnson’s argument, in other words, itself continues in significant ways the dualism between sacrament and the world, nature and the supernatural, intelligent order and sanctity that Schmemmann, de Lubac and Balthasar have all insisted is characteristic of much traditional-modern Christian (Orthodox and Catholic and Protestant) theology. In coming to terms with Johnson’s argument, therefore, we need to take account of at least two consequences of this paradoxical fact.

(2) (a) On the one hand, this paradox implies that an adequate assessment of Johnson’s “feminist” theology just so far invites a (renewed) scrutiny also of the “traditional” theology criticized by Schmemmann (et al.). Viewed from the fundamental theological-ontological perspective sketched earlier, we should see that this “traditional” theology itself does not so much oppose as actually make ready the road taken in Johnson’s “feminism.” “Traditional” theology in fact, in its failure to order things intrinsically toward (and from) the symbolism indicated in liturgy, nuptiality, and Mary, *just so far* inclines *logically* (ontologically) toward an inadequate sense of creaturely autonomy, and indeed toward an inadequate sense of the masculine as the privileged carrier of this autonomy. We must acknowledge, therefore, that there has just so far existed in the tradition an ontological disposition toward what Johnson identifies as “patriarchy,” “paternalism,” and “clericalism.” Her criticisms here are not without foundation.

To be sure, the “traditional” theology criticized by Schmemmann (de Lubac, Balthasar) typically contains a deep sense of liturgical and indeed Marian piety. But that is just the burden of Schmemmann’s criticism: Mary and the liturgy, and the nuptiality implied in these, were precisely *not* integrated sufficiently into the (original-destined) *intelligent-cosmic order* of things.²⁵ The neuralgic point is that this tradition failed precisely to understand the *legitimate*

²⁵The point here of course is quite relevant to the decision at the Second Vatican Council to place its reflection on Mary within its ecclesiology (ecclesial order) (*Lumen Gentium*).

autonomy of creaturely reality from the beginning in its inherently *symbolic* structure.

The point, in sum, is that a merely “pious” response to Johnson—a response, in other words, that remains only moral and/or positivistic rather than genuinely theological and ontological in character—in the end only begs the seriousness of the questions raised by her concerns.

(2) (b) But the paradox indicated here also cuts the other way. For Johnson, on the above reading and however unwittingly, herself continues to assume exactly the wrong elements in the tradition. That is, rather than challenge the false sense of autonomy, and indeed of the masculine as generated and sustained by this false sense of autonomy, she moves instead now “simply” to “democratize” this autonomy. This false autonomy, which was formerly largely restricted (i.e., as a matter of theological-ontological *order*) to men, and indeed often checked by an accompanying liturgical-nuptial-Marian piety, now becomes unrestricted and unchecked: it is available to all, women *and* men. All of us are now equal “partners” in our autonomy; none of us is a “handmaid.”

The problem, of course, at least from the point of view argued earlier, is that such a way of proceeding prevents us from reaching all the way to the source of the older (onto-)logic of “clericalism.” Indeed, this way of proceeding succeeds for the most part, as far as I can tell, only in democratizing the problem. Formerly restricted largely to the right, the logic of clericalism—which, again, consists in a (juridical-male) power insufficiently integrated in and by liturgical-nuptial-Marian love, beauty, and drama—now becomes a “prerogative” of both the right and the left. The centralized authority of the old clericalism gives way to the decentralized authority of the new clericalism of a Church governed by “experts,” commissions, committees, procedures, media strategies, computers and technology (e-mails, faxes, cell phones), multiple assemblies, and much chatter.²⁶ (As Balthasar once put it, the decentralization of the

²⁶All of which, without life- and depth-giving (liturgical, nuptial, Marian) patience, produce only more *mechanisms*, not *organisms*.

Cf., in connection with the general point made here, Eugene McCarragher, “Smile, When You Say ‘Laity,’” *The Hidden Triumph of the Consumer Ethos*,” *Commonweal* (12 September 1997), 21–25; and the symposium in response to McCarragher, “Smile, When You say ‘Starbucks,’” *Commonweal* (21 November

Roman curia has led directly to the “curialization” of the diocese [or better today: to the curialization of the groupings of dioceses called bishops’ conferences]).²⁷

The upshot of Johnson’s failure to challenge much of “traditional” theology’s (inadequate) ontology of autonomy, in a word, is that she offers what in the end appears to be little more than a democratic–feminist version of precisely what is most objectionable in the older ontology—a democratic–feminist version, that is, of the logic of autonomy lying at the core of (the older) “clericalism.” In a word, her manner of proceeding assumes just the dialectical opposition between “subordination” and “autonomy” that lies at the heart of that earlier logic.²⁸

My own response to Johnson and her many legitimate concerns is already suggested in my earlier argument: namely, that we need to challenge more radically the older sense of ontological–cosmic order, precisely by integrating this order more fully into its original–destined liturgical, nuptial, Marian symbolism; and that we need to see, further, how this symbolism implies a certain priority for the feminine in our understanding of the creaturely order of things (cf. Schmemmann’s reference to the “*womanhood* of creation”). The burden of my argument in this connection is that this priority of the feminine implies a relation between women and men that is, always and everywhere, on earth and in heaven, a relation at once of (“perichoretic”) unity and of asymmetry—that we can legitimately abstract from neither the unity *in* the difference nor the difference *in*

1997), 12–19. McCarragher, however, does not describe in terms of “clericalism” the phenomenon of what he refers to as the new authority–style of the “Church Mellow.” I should perhaps emphasize that I offer my criticism of “clericalism” here in what I take to be the spirit of Georges Bernanos, Charles Péguy, Madeleine Delbrêl, and Dorothy Day, in addition to Balthasar. Consistent with the criticisms of these persons, my own criticism does not intend to blur or attenuate the essential distinction between ordained and common ministry in the Church, but only to argue for a new sense of the whole Church as integrated into an adequately liturgical, nuptial, Marian order; that is, precisely as the larger unified context within which this (ineliminable) distinction receives its proper (and in fact deeper) legitimacy.

²⁷Cf. Balthasar’s *Gottbereites Leben* (which contains his earlier [1949] *Der Laie und der Rätestand* [*Ordenstand*]) (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1993).

²⁸Consistent with that tradition, then, Johnson fails to see that creaturely being is a sharing in the *asymmetrically different unity* of both “subordination and “autonomy” that exists in God himself: cf. fns. 8, 9, 10, and 25, and (4) (a) above.

the unity. It must be acknowledged here, however, that my earlier argument makes no claim of having developed adequately the sense of simultaneous unity and asymmetry in its thematic implications for the relation between women and men—and that my argument, accordingly, leaves this important task yet to be undertaken.

My earlier argument, rather, has had for its limited but crucial purpose a defense of the notion (1) that creaturely being is structurally a being-with, a “with” implying an asymmetrical mutuality between the one (self) and the Other (God); (2) that the creaturely being as so structured is realized archetypically in the sacramental liturgy interpreted primarily through the (theological) nuptiality disclosed uniquely in Mary; (3) that the being-with characteristic of creaturely being is just so far primarily (asymmetrically) the being-with proper to the feminine, or to the “bride.”²⁹

Again, I am acutely aware that the sense of the priority of nuptiality, of Mary, or the bridal and the feminine raises severe questions of its own with respect to both the tradition criticized by Schmemmann and the feminist tradition articulated by Johnson, questions that evidently must be dealt with more fully on another occasion. Regarding the feminist tradition, I would only want to add here, apropos of my earlier argument and of my comments in (2) (b), that I believe Johnson’s “egalitarian” (symmetrical) approach to the question of the relation between women and men once again, however unintentionally and paradoxically, retains a significant aspect of the dualism rejected (at least by implication) in Schmemmann’s symbolic understanding of space, time, and matter as symbolic, an understanding recapitulated in John Paul II’s notion of the “nuptial body.” That is, on Johnson’s reading, the differences

²⁹We should perhaps make explicit here what is (of necessity, given present limits) left implicit in the present article: namely, that the being of the masculine of course involves an intrinsic “with” as well, precisely in a *different (asymmetrical) order* that presupposes a simultaneous unity (“perichoresis”). The masculine and the feminine each involve an original and intrinsic “subordination” to the other, or again a “making space for the other,” *differently-asymmetrically*. It should be clear from the argument advanced in this article, in other words, that the unity to be sought between men and women is not the “egalitarian” sort characteristic of “Enlightenment” thought, which would insist on symmetry as the condition of “equality” (which seems to me in the end to imply an insufficiently “trinitarian” view of unity). However, once again, what the respective differences (in unity) of the masculine and feminine consist in needs to be sorted out more fully elsewhere.

between women and men can have no “natural” or “essential” significance. The differences in the bodies of women and men thus can have no intrinsic human or spiritual significance—*qua* natural differences. The different anatomical shapes of women and men as a matter of principle can never serve in an intrinsic way as carriers, precisely *in* their physiological character, of any “transcendent” meaning. It is difficult to see how such a notion of the body amounts in the end to anything more than the dumb-mechanical body of Descartes, whose dualism in this respect is a paradigm of the non-symbolic understanding³⁰ that it has been our burden to reject.

VIII

I conclude with a text from an author likely to be associated with the line of argument sketched in these pages. And yet I believe there is a basic sense in which we best understand Friedrich Nietzsche when we view his lifelong quest in terms of the concern that guided his first book on “The Birth of Tragedy”: that is, to hold in unity, while not releasing the simultaneous tension between, *order* (Apollo) and *passion* (e.g., love, eros) (Dionysus). What renders Nietzsche relevant to the problems addressed in this paper, indeed what makes him in my opinion almost indispensable for understanding properly the problems of our time—and shows his deep affinity with the concerns of Schmemmann (de Lubac, Balthasar)—is his conviction that the (modern) problem of the relation between passion (“spirituality,” “piety”) and order is a problem fundamentally of the *death of God in the cosmos*. While the following text does not represent all of Nietzsche, it equally does not represent only a stray passage. On the contrary, the text goes to the core of what Nietzsche attempted with the whole of his being and life to secure: the *passion* for the infinite lying at the heart of any adequate sense of *human-cosmic order*.

Is there a more sacred state than pregnancy? . . . At such a time we refrain from many things without having to force ourselves to do so; we suppress the angry word, we grasp the hand forgivingly; our child must be born from all that is best and gentlest. We shun our own harshness and brusqueness in case it

³⁰Wherein the body (thing), in other words, reveals only itself and nothing else.

should instil a drop of unhappiness into the cup of the beloved unknown. Everything is veiled, ominous. . . . *it* is growing, *it* is coming to light; . . . We are thrown back altogether upon indirect, beneficent and defensive influences. “Something greater than we are is growing here”—such is our most secret hope; we prepare everything with a view to his birth and prosperity—not merely everything that is useful, but also the noblest gifts of our souls.

We should, and can, live under the influence of such a blessed inspiration! Whether what we are looking forward to is a thought or a deed, our relationship to every essential achievement is none other than that of pregnancy, and all our vainglorious boasting about “willing” and “creating” should be cast to the winds! True and ideal selfishness consists in always watching over and restraining the soul, so that our productiveness may come to a beautiful termination.³¹

□

DAVID L. SCHINDLER is dean and professor of fundamental theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C.

³¹Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, 522.