

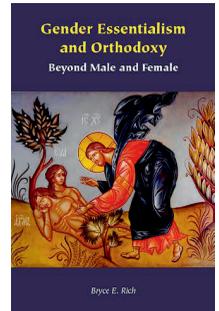
Review of Bryce E. Rich, *Gender Essentialism and Orthodoxy*

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The United States Supreme Court's 2015 decision to legalize same-sex marriage in all fifty states drew the Orthodox Church's attention to LGBTQ issues in a new way. Now that same-sex couples had access to civil marriage, the Church needed to decide whether it would recognize the sanctity of same-sex unions by granting admittance to the sacrament of marriage. The contours of this ecclesial conversation reflected many of the tensions already exhibited in the earlier Orthodox and Catholic responses to the ordination of women in the Anglican Church, beginning in the 1970s. Bryce E. Rich's *Gender Essentialism and Orthodoxy: Beyond Male and Female*, which builds on his 2017 dissertation of the same title, argues that, in order to form a dogmatically, theologically, and pastorally responsible opinion on these and other related questions, the Church must first have an understanding of the roles that gender, sex, and sexuality play in scriptural, patristic, and current scientific anthropologies.

The introductory chapter lays out the author's method. Keeping in mind the ultimate goal of Orthodoxy as *theosis*, or union with God, Rich performs an immanent critique, "internal to contemporary Orthodoxy itself, evaluating shared communal practices by the light of the tradition's own commitments" (4). He defines

three categories of tradition—dogmatic pronouncements of the Seven Ecumenical Councils, *theologoumena* (opinions of church fathers), and personal opinions of later theologians—in order to clarify which "shared communal practices" and beliefs are matters of dogma, and thus unchangeable, and which are matters of custom that may be discussed and reimagined. Among other considerations, Rich draws our attention to the fathers' contextual engagement with Platonic worldviews that understood the creation to be mathematically ordered and created things to follow the pattern of the eternal *logoi*. While this construct is far different from our present understanding of the world, it "still underlies some of the modern Orthodox thought . . . where male and female are envisioned as distinct principles [eternal *logoi*] that produce two separate kinds of human beings—men and women—whose natures and functions are dictated by the principles themselves." Since, within this construct, a deviation from the principle must be explained by sin and its effects, the Platonically inspired metaphysics cannot properly account for the "complexity and variation within the various biological and psychosocial expressions of human individuals" (10). A further complication arises today: while ancient philosophers and theologians understood male and female bodies to be at different points in



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a continuum, with male bodies being further perfected than female bodies (a one-sex model), present-day thinkers generally start from the position that males and females have distinct bodies that mature towards their respective ends (a two-sex model).

Chapter 2 turns to the patristic sources, beginning with Platonic texts (the *Symposium*, the *Phaedrus*, and the *Timaeus*) that were broadly influential in patristic thought; it then turns to the accounts of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 and the redeployment of Platonic texts in patristic allegorical interpretations of the creation accounts. Rich groups the sources into five themes in terms of how they understand gender and sex: (1) the use of masculine terms and imagery to talk about “women’s movement toward spiritual perfection”; (2) the use of grammatical gender to assign positive or negative traits to masculinity and femininity (usually to describe the Platonic division of the soul); (3) the assumption of a sense of equality between men and women, given their many common struggles and rewards; (4) the erasure, in the eschaton, of sexual difference, or a drastic shift from present functions and ends; and (5) the position that infants either receive both a soul and a body from their parents (traducianism) or else that God creates a soul awaiting embodiment at the moment of conception (creationism). The final section of the chapter presents some of the common goods to be drawn from the fathers and mothers, noting especially the well represented affirmation that both women and men are image-bearers of God. The many patristic voices represented in this chapter underscore that the church fathers and mothers are not univocal, especially not in respect to their understandings of gender: “Contemporary Orthodox ideas about the fixed, ontological

differences between men and women are not at all rooted in the patristic tradition, but rather in extra-Orthodox sources encountered in much more recent cultural contexts” (55).

Having hinted at the end of Chapter 2 at the problems of more recent Orthodox theologians, who often retroject gender-essentialist ideas onto patristic sources, Chapter 3 considers Thomas Hopko and his sources before turning to Elisabeth Behr-Sigel’s response to him. Of particular interest in this chapter is Rich’s detailed account of Hopko’s “silent sources,” with whom Hopko does not openly engage for a variety of reasons. For instance, Rich points to Hopko’s frequently “silent” use of the thought of Vladimir Solovyev. Moreover, he notes that this omission also obscures a range of other influences transmitted through Solovyev’s thought, including: Jakob Böhme, the father of modern Sophiology; the Kabbalistic teachings on the Sefirot (gendered divine emanations); and Adam Kadmon, a Kabbalistic primordial image with both masculine and feminine attributes. Rich highlights the prominent if unacknowledged use of these non-Orthodox sources, not to disparage the healthy practice of Orthodox scholars engaging scholars from other religious traditions, but rather to underscore that Hopko’s claims, despite professing to be grounded in patristic sources, actually reflect a much greater philosophical admixture of patristic thought with non-Orthodox gender essentialist theologies that were adopted by members of the Paris School in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The chapter concludes with Rich’s analysis of Elisabeth Behr-Sigel’s responses to Hopko, which she grounded in a more personalist appropriation of the patristic tradition. In her speech at the World Council

of Churches' conference on the ordination of women, she critiqued both Hopko and Paul Evdokimov for confusing "the human person with the category of sex" (90).

Continuing the exploration of the relationship between person, gender, sex, and sexuality, Rich goes on in Chapter 4 to consider the confluence of the personalism of Orthodox thinkers of Behr-Sigel's era and the destabilizing ideas of gender and queer theory that have emerged in more recent decades. Personalism emerged in the Paris School as an answer to the anthropological turn, begun by Lossky, that defined the human as a free person who exceeds nature and is not determined by it. It underscores the "instabilities of culturally dependent categories" and has an "apophatic understanding of the human person" (93). In holding that each person is both unique and relational, personalism responds to individualism, which leads to capitalism, as well as to Marxism on the left and Nazism and fascism on the right. These ideologies all trample on the uniqueness of the individual person in their pursuit of the common good. Rich delves into Lossky's reliance on both personalism and the thought of Gregory of Nyssa in order to communicate a non-gender-essentialist picture of the human person. Rich draws a distinction between an individual—that is, a collection of attributes that are, in theory, repeatable (the "doppelganger effect")—and a person—"the one who exceeds the common nature," just as the persons of the Trinity exceed their common *ousia*. This distinction serves to rebut the gender essentialist claim that the categories of male and female are rooted, at least allegorically, in gendered aspects of the Trinitarian persons. In this framework, men image Christ by sharing in the same male principle,

while women image the Holy Spirit because they share a female principle. The essentialist argument claims that humans are binary, either male or female, possessing ontological attributes and charisms assigned on this basis. In contrast, in Lossky's "person," sexedness belongs to shared human nature, and, while persons have in themselves all things common to that shared nature, they also transcend that nature. On transcending human nature, Behr-Sigel points to the example of the free choice exercised in consecrated life, and calls for a decoupling of charisms from sex and gender. Lest anyone should claim that the distinction between sex and gender is a product of modern philosophical discourse, Rich also points out that gender and sex are already distinguished in the patristic sources of the Greco-Roman world.

In the second part of Chapter 4, Rich turns to the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality in order to underscore the "instability of gender categories across time, culture, and locale" (108). While *sex* is typically determined by biological markers, *gender* reflects one's personal, social, or legal status as male or female, not accounting for sex. A *gender role* refers to the way that actions reveal a boy/man or girl/woman, while *gender identity* is the subjective experience of gender. "[I]n personalist terms, human persons present as concrete, gendered individuals. But in their personhood, they are free of any determinism that would suggest that they are bound to an essential set of gendered characteristics and activities" (108). While some Orthodox thinkers consider male and female embodiments as "ontological modes of being," even biological sex is less stable than is sometimes asserted. In addition to the relative frequency of genital, hormonal, and genetic intersex states, Rich references the

phenomena of micro-chimerism and genetic mosaicism, conditions which underscore that even the lines between genetically or biologically male and female are medically and scientifically blurred in some cases.

The patristic, dogmatic, and current theological and scientific discourses detailed in the first four chapters allow the author to make a constructive turn in the latter half of the book by employing a personalist anthropology to propose answers regarding women in the priesthood (Chapter 5); the sacramentality of same-sex relationships (Chapter 6); and the care of intersex, trans, and gender-nonconforming persons in the parish (Chapter 7). On the topic of women's ordination, Rich begins with the common arguments against ordination before critiquing each by the standards of the tradition and proposing a personalist approach to the question. Persons have a common human nature expressed in many ways, including through gender, but these expressions do not change the underlying human nature, just as they do not communicate the fullness of the person. Since unique persons are called to the vocation of the priesthood, Rich argues that there is no impediment to women's ordination. Because the priestly vocation is not just the laying on of hands but a lifelong vocation of service, barring women from ordination creates a stumbling block to their *theosis* and leads to an absence or *aporia* in the body of Christ. Rich argues that barring some people from ordination due to biological sex "closes off a sacramental channel of grace offered both to the local parish and as an aid in the Church's mission in the world" (133). By barring women from ordination, then, the Church "impedes both particular persons and the collective body in the ultimate aim of

ever fuller participation in divine-human communion" (133). Therein, we corporately sin against those whose God-given vocations we deny, against the corporate body of the church, and against those whom the church could more effectively reach if it overcame this theological and philosophical error. In short, Rich argues that "underlying Hopko's argument is an exercise in question-begging in which he assumes the current state of practice as the only way things can legitimately be as an element of his argument. In so doing, he and other essentialists attempt to limit God with respect to whom God may call to the priestly vocation" (134).

In Chapter 6 Rich challenges the Church's stance on same-sex relationships, responding to Hopko's statement that "God does not make human beings homosexual" by noting that, similarly, "God does not make heterosexual people either" (136). He then provides a critical summary of the work of Elizabeth Moberly, another Orthodox theologian, who, in an appropriation of Freudian psycho-genesis, argued that "homosexuality is the result of early childhood trauma related to the same-sex parent" (138). Moberly emerged as an expert on gender identity and sexuality in the 1980s as questions regarding pastoral care for gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals surfaced. Moberly argued that "God's will for the human species and God's very image are displayed in the gender complementarity of the man-woman relationship" (139). While other gender essentialists, like Hopko, were influenced by the Paris School, Moberly takes her theological inspiration from Karl Barth. Rich asserts that not only is her anthropology problematic, but her Christology is even more so, as she claims that Christ was heterosexual because he had a

strong relationship with his heavenly Father. This latter claim is problematic for a number of reasons, not least of which is that “the suggestion that God can act as the same-sex love-object of the God-man, Jesus Christ, is a category error, resulting from a mixing of the two natures of Christ in a way that is excluded by the Chalcedonian Definition” (140). Rich notes that, even beyond Moberley’s theological and philosophical issues, her prescriptions for reparative therapy, in which a homosexual person is paired with a therapist of the same sex in order to repair the damaged child-parent bond, are pastorally problematic and destructive. Moberley’s model presumes “a modern paradigm of gender complementarity, informed by a two-sex body model and a strict male-female binary opposition, ” but these assumptions “obscure the unique human persons they attempt to classify” (144).

Chapter 7 addresses the distinction between sacramental and civil marriages in regard to same-sex couples. Rich argues that Canada’s *Civil Marriage Act* and the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* opened “a space in which the Orthodox Church must acknowledge same-sex relationships in civil society even as it decides internally how to relate to same-sex couples whom the state recognizes as married” (147). Rich begins by pointing to the expansive manner in which the “one flesh” idiom that appears in Genesis, the Pauline epistles, and the New Testament is interpreted. He notes that, more than referring simply to the union of a man and woman in marital sexual union, other uses of the term, in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, point to the emergent familial bonds of extended and adopted family. While many gender essentialist and anti-marriage equality authors

point to the procreative good that can only come from heterosexual unions, Rich points to the broader ways that this procreative command was already being interpreted in the patristic period: for instance, both John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo considered the procreative command to “increase and multiply and fill the earth” to have been completed, rendering the need for further human procreation obsolete. Further, contemporary Orthodox families are frequently composed of children from previous relationships, adopted children, and foster children. “By focusing on either Platonic principles or the application of natural law with its understanding of fitting particular body parts together for a *telos* of procreation, we risk obscuring unique person, who always exceeds the common human nature” (152). Finally, in considering the early church fathers’ view of penetration as resulting in de-masculinization, Rich points out that these patristic authors cannot, in fact, envision a loving same-sex relationship: in the Greco-Roman context, penetration was an act of corruption that threatened the social standing of the one penetrated.

In the last chapter, Rich offers some final thoughts on the pastoral care of intersex, trans, and gender-nonconforming persons in the parish setting. He argues that, rather than leaving education and advocacy to individuals who belong to these marginalized groups, the onus is on bishops and church administration to educate parishes. Some of his practical recommendations involving intersex children have the pastor expressing a willingness to change the child’s baptismal name, should the need arise, as well as referencing “A Prayer at the Giving of a New Name upon Change of Sex,” published by Metropolitan Timotheos Matthaïakes in 1985.

Gender Essentialism and Orthodoxy presents a thorough investigation of questions of gender, sex, and sexuality as these have been considered in the Orthodox Christian context. Through his careful attention to the patristic and scriptural sources, as well as his analysis of both the positions and the underlying sources of many modern commentators, Rich lays the foundation for a critique from within the Orthodox tradition that should be legible to any contemporary Orthodox theologian. His critique, which unfolds in the second half of the book, incorporates up-to date research and theory on sex, gender, and sexuality. And his discussion of pastoral approaches to LGBTQ parishioners grounds the heavily theoretical and historical mode of the first half of the book in the profound vulnerability of these persons and the ways that they uniquely image and mediate God for the community.

Rich strikes a delicate balance between explaining the often-complex philosophies operating in the patristic period, as well as those in the Paris School, and connecting this information to the thread of his personalist critique of the tradition. Critics may

argue that his employment of Judith Butler's critique of binary conceptions of sex and gender is odd, given his recurring critiques of other Orthodox thinkers who have employed non-Orthodox sources. However, Rich is clear that he is not criticizing the use of extra-Orthodox sources, but rather the claim that ideas found within these other sources can also be found in the patristic corpus.

Gender Essentialism will be a useful resource to scholars in theology and especially to those focused on gender in the patristic period, patristic retrieval in the Paris school, Orthodoxy in America, and queer theologies. While undergraduates might struggle with the density of the historical and dogmatic material, it would be appropriate for upper-level seminars. In addition to scholarly circles, this is an important source of accurate historical and dogmatic information as well as pastoral insights that bishops, clergy, seminarians, and parish councils will benefit from. Perhaps most importantly, the book may serve as a welcome reprieve to the many LGBTQ Orthodox Christians who have struggled to feel at home in their own tradition. ✱



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