

# COULD CHRIST HAVE BEEN BORN A WOMAN?

## A Medieval Debate

*Joan Gibson*

Contemporary Christianity is far from resolving many controversies about gender and religion. Problems arise around issues ranging from the role of women in society, to the suitability of church art portraying Christ as a woman; from a tendency to identify women with the flesh or sin, to the ordination of women or the use of inclusive language. While differing responses to feminist, or even feminine, elements in our understanding of the divine are clearly at stake in all these issues, it is important to note how current debates are also fueled by conflicting interpretations of history and historical documents. These debates take place within a tradition and society that include misogyny and male domination, and they rely on methodologies developed in communities that actively excluded women. In these respects, medieval Catholicism exemplifies a similar set of difficulties about gender and God and is an important conduit for the transmission and continued influence of these difficulties on the Christian heritage. Francine Cardman suggests, in the context of arguments about women's ordination, that Catholic prohibitions depend on an incomplete and misleading reading of medieval sources.<sup>1</sup> Systematic theology, from its earliest days, combined tradition and contemporary concerns. In her discussion of the rise of systematic theology in the twelfth century, Marcia Colish argues that theology "could be and was harnessed to a variety of practical agendas in the period."<sup>2</sup> There is no reason to think this is any less true today, and an examination of the medieval debate on the sex of God reveals that contemporary discussion is far from a historical oddity. Rather it fits within a long series of Christian approaches to God through the female.<sup>3</sup> This ongoing discussion offers ample

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<sup>1</sup> Francine Cardman, "The Medieval Question of Women and Orders," *The Thomist* 42 (1978): 582-99.

<sup>2</sup> Marcia Colish, "Systematic theology and theological renewal in the twelfth century," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 18:2 (Fall 1988): 138.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent review of four medieval uses of Sophia literature, for example, see Barbara Newman, "Some Mediæval Theologians and the Sophia Tradition," *The Downside Review* 108:371 (April 1990): 111-30.

historical warrant for contemporary efforts to reformulate criteria for thinking about God's gender.

Questions about the sex of God and its relation to human sex roles seem to have evoked lively interest in the middle ages from around the closing years of the eleventh century. Anselm, for example, declares in the *Monologium*, "I think I ought not to by-pass the question of which set of terms is more suitable for . . . [the persons of the Trinity] 'father and son' or 'mother and daughter'—for there is no sexual distinction in the Supreme Spirit and the Word."<sup>4</sup> He offers a grammatical argument that both persons are Spirit—denoted by a masculine noun, but equally both are truth and wisdom—requiring feminine nouns. Anselm bolsters this grammatical sexual equality with the empirical finding that while in most species the male is naturally superior, the case is reversed for some kinds of birds in which the female is always the larger and stronger. His response to the question of which sex is more appropriate to the trinity is based on different biological and metaphysical principles, however the role of the father in generation is that of first and principal cause and thus a son bears greater similarity to his father.<sup>5</sup>

There appears to have been continuing interest in questions about the sex of God, for in the 1150s Peter Lombard raised the issue in a new form, asking in book three of the *Sentences* whether God could have assumed humanity in the female sex.<sup>6</sup> For his pains, Walter of St. Victor (d. 1190) declared him blasphemous, though unintentionally so.<sup>7</sup> Despite Walter's aggressive antirationalism, the *Sentences* were enshrined in the theological faculty at Paris by the 1220s and commentaries on the *Sentences*, which had already begun to appear, are the primary source for the continuing history of this question. Over the following three hundred years, during which the *Sentences* dominated theological studies in the universities, the issue was kept in philosophical and theological consciousness.

Of the forty relatively complete *Sentence* commentaries available to me, thirteen—almost one-third of the total—comment on this question, and

<sup>4</sup> "sed nec hoc negligendum existimo, an patris et filii, an matris et filiae magis illis apta sit appellatio, cum in eis nulla sit sexus discretio" Anselm of Canterbury, *Monologium*, in *Opera omnia*, vol 1, ed F S Schmitt (Rome and Edinburgh Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1938), 58 Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, trans., *Anselm of Canterbury*, 2 vols (Toronto Edwin Mellen Press, 1974), 1 55–56

<sup>5</sup> Cf Aristotle *De generatione animalium* 4 767b1–769a30

<sup>6</sup> *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, 3rd ed., ed Ignatius Brady (Grottaferrata Spicilegium Sacrum Bonaventurianum, 1971–81), 83 III *Sent.*, d 12, c 4 The various medieval books of *Sentences* collected and generally attempted to reconcile the opinions of patristic writers and other authoritative sources on important religious topics

<sup>7</sup> Gualterus a S. Victore, in D'Argentré, *Collectio iudiciorum*, 1 117 Cited in St. Bonaventure's *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum* in *Opera theologica selecta Liber II Sententiarum*, ed Leonardo M. Bello (Quaracchi and Florence Collegii S. Bonaventurae), 2 271, ed's n 1

additional authors raise it elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The bulk of the commentaries are clustered in a relatively brief span in the middle of the thirteenth century, when the question clearly engages the most concentrated attention, showing the greatest detail and variety in argument. The most extended discussions occur during this period also, the longest being Roland of Cremona's at four and a half pages. They generally range from one-and-a-half to two pages in length, as for example Bonaventure's and Aquinas's commentaries. Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century commentaries, however, average only about a single long paragraph, often with repetitive arguments or sometimes consisting of only a few lines with little argument, although Denis the Carthusian is more comprehensive. Thus, in contrast to the general trend for *Sentence* commentaries, which is to feature fewer questions treated at greater length, this question is retained, but interest in it seems to decline toward the fourteenth century. Surprisingly, it then appears again in the fifteenth century, where it occurs in the highest percentage of commentaries I examined (four out of seven). Consistent with this picture and the development of the commentary tradition, it is the early works that are the more philosophical and that seem to wrestle much more with the implications of the question.<sup>9</sup>

Turning to the question of whether Christ could have been born a woman, we find Peter Lombard uncomfortable with the topic. Apparently

<sup>8</sup> The commentaries I have used are as follows: in the twelfth century, Gundulphus Bononiensis (fl. 1150); in the thirteenth century, Roland of Cremona (c. 1236), Albertus Magnus (c. 1243), Bonaventure (1250–52), Thomas Aquinas (1254–56), Peter of Tarantaise (Innocent V) (1257–59), Richard of Mediavilla (Middleton) (1282–84). In the fourteenth century there are commentaries by Durandus of St. Pourcain (d. 1332) and Peter of Aquila (d. 1361); in the fifteenth, by John Hus (d. 1415), Henry of Gorkum (d. 1431), Denis the Carthusian (d. 1471) and Gabriel Biel (d. 1495). Franciscans and Dominicans are almost equally represented.

Only Aquinas discusses the question more than once, cf. n. 29 below. Alexander of Hales (d. 1245) mentions it in passing in bk. 3 of his *Summae Theologicae*, tractate 1, q. 2, c. 7; his view is said by Denis the Carthusian virtually to contain that of William of Auxerre (d. 1231), though I have not found a reference there. Ulrich of Strasbourg (d. 1277) in his *Summa de bono*, treats the question in bk. 5, tractate 1, q. 12, which I have not seen. There are also references to mention by Pierre de la Palude (d. 1343), III *Sent.*, d. 12, q. 2; Stephen Brulefer (d. 1499), q. 4; and Gabriel Vasquez (d. 1604), q. 31, which I have been unable to locate. In a class by itself is a turn-of-the-century compilation of opinions of Duns Scotus (d. 1308) based somewhat loosely on his several commentaries, arranged in the order of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa*. I have been unable to verify the attributions of some of the opinions grouped as a commentary on this question—one which Scotus does not treat expressly. The compiler, however, gives a brief but emphatic exposition of what he takes to be Scotus's view, see n. 31 below. John Duns Scotus, *Summa Theologica*, selected and arranged by Jerome de Montefortino (Rome: Sallustian Press, 1903), 336.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent discussion of the question-commentary see Anthony Kenny and Jan Pinborg, "Medieval philosophical literature," in *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy*, ed., Norman Kretzman, Anthony Kenny, and Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 30–33.

reacting to recent speculation on the necessity of Christ assuming the male sex, he notes that those who ask the question may be unduly inquisitive.<sup>10</sup> Although he says "it is customary to ask" the question and that "some judge" that Christ could indeed have assumed humanity in the female sex, he does not really address the topic. His answer turns instead to Augustine's *Eighty-three Questions*, where a related issue is raised in response to a series of questions on the Christian view of embodiment. These investigate the motions of the soul, sensory knowledge, whether the body comes from God, and whether the soul, after being in a body, needs to be transfigured before seeing God.<sup>11</sup> In question 11, Augustine asks why Christ was born of a woman.<sup>12</sup> The context is the issue of the worth of the body and its role in redemption, with Augustine defending a comparatively positive assessment of embodiment. Situated thus, the question emphasizes Christ's incarnation as salvific for all humans and for the body as well as the soul. His choice to assume human nature through birth rather than through a separate creation signifies the worth even of women and female bodies, and intensifies the possibility of salvation for all by stressing the universality of the promise.<sup>13</sup>

Peter Lombard's twelfth-century formulation of the question, in its divergence from Augustine, suggests the nature of contemporary interest. He groups it with three other questions about Christ—whether He always was or whether He had a beginning, whether He could have sinned or have not been God, and whether Christ could have assumed a different humanity or one different from the race of Adam. The questions of Christ's sinlessness and his humanity are drawn from Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, and based ultimately on Augustine.<sup>14</sup> These earlier writers raised the issue of Christ's

<sup>10</sup> Si Deus potuit assumere hominem in sexu muliebri. Solet etiam quaeri, quamvis curiose, a nonnullis, si Deus humanam naturam potuit assumere secundum muliebrem sexum. Quidam arbitrantur eum potuisse assumere hominem in femineo sexu ut assumpsit in virili, sed opportunius atque convenientius factum est ut de femina nasceretur et virum assumeret, ut ita utriusque sexus liberatio ostenderetur. Unde Augustinus in libro 84 (sic) *Quaestionum*: "Hominis liberatio in utroque sexu debuit apparere. Ergo quia virum oportebat suscipere, qui sexus honorabilior est, consequens erat ut feminei sexus liberatio hinc appareret, quod ille vir de femina natus est. Sapientia ergo Dei, quae dicitur unigenitus Filius, homine suscepto in utero et de utero Virginis, liberationem hominis indicavit."

<sup>11</sup> J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae cursus completus series latina*, 221 vols. (Paris 1841–64), 40:14. Hereafter *PL*.

<sup>12</sup> This may echo a horror of the flesh and birth akin to the Manichean views, still widespread in Augustine's period. A later version, that women are not capable of grace and beatitude, is mentioned by Albert the Great, *Summae Theologiae*, 2nd pt., tract 11, q. 64 in *Opera omnia*, ed. A. Borgnet (Paris: Vivès), 32:613.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Augustine *De agone christiano* 22–24 (*PL* 40:302–3).

<sup>14</sup> On sinlessness, bk. 2, c. 10 in *Opera omnia*, ed. F. S. Schmitt (Rome: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1940), 2:106–8, on the race of Adam, c. 8:102–4, cf. Augustine *De Trinitate* 13 c. 18 (*PL* 42:1032–33).

membership in the race of Adam in connection with the transmission of His humanity through birth from a virgin woman. Lombard, however, splits this question to insert the query about the possibility of Christ's birth *as a woman*. Subsequent commentators often recombine the question of whether Christ could have been a woman with either the question of whether He could have been incarnated outside the Adamic stock or whether He should have been born from a woman, distinguishing in each case between possibility and appropriateness. Both the setting and Lombard's phrasing of the question intensify the emphasis on the Christological issues so typical of the period. They bring to the fore the possibility of different incarnational forms, emphasizing the difficulty of grasping how the divine and human natures were united in the single person of Christ (the hypostatic union) and raising questions of whether there were any limitations on the God-man. Although Peter's brief response to the question about a female Christ does not really take up the challenge he poses—following instead Augustine's defense of birth from a woman—nevertheless his answer sets out the main lines of the commentaries that follow. Christ could indeed have chosen to assume human nature as a woman, but it was better not to have done so. It was more appropriate that He was born of a woman and assumed a male body in order to show Christ's liberation of both sexes from sin. Further, Lombard adds, He ought to take on the male sex since it is the more honorable.

It was far from clear to the earliest commentators, however, what it might mean that God could be incarnated as a woman. Gandulph of Bologna, writing around the mid-twelfth century, uses the question to highlight broad issues in incarnational theology. He asks whether there was some particular man whom Christ assumed, and whether some particular human son is united to the Son of God. Further, he asks whether the Virgin's child would be a son or a daughter if Christ assumed flesh in the female sex. He answers that Christ would be a Son of God and a daughter of Mary. The possibility of a female Christ thus jeopardizes the unity of the daughter with the Son who, as the Word of the Father, has existed from all eternity. A positive answer to the question seems to lead to the view that there could be two offspring in one person. Treading cautiously, Gandulph concludes "whether a daughter would be the Son of God, if He had assumed flesh in the other sex, or even whether He could have assumed flesh in the other sex, we do not assert, lest it seem rash."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Si dicatur, quod filia illa non esset filius, sed unita filio, sic dicendum videtur, quod filius, qui conceptus est in utero virginis, non sit verbum patris, sed unitus verbo patris, et ita duo filii in una persona sunt uniti. Sed utrum esset filia filius dei, si in alio sexu carnem assumpsisset, an etiam in alio sexu carnem assumere potuisset, a nobis non asseritur, ne in hoc temeritas videatur. Gandulphus Bononiensis, *Sententiarum libri quatuor* III, 14, ed. Joannes de Walter (Vienna: Aemilius Haim, 1924), 285.

Almost a century later, Roland of Cremona uses the question to clarify the unity of the individual soul and body of Christ with the Son of God. If the union of human and divine ceased, would the same person (*homo*) remain as before? And if the Son of God, abandoning the humanity He first had, were to take on a different one, would the same person (*homo*) remain as before? Again the problem is heightened by asking what the situation would be if the Son of God should leave the human nature He had before and take on another one in the body of a woman. Would that woman be the same person (*homo*) as before? Further if the Son of God had originally assumed human nature in the female sex, wouldn't that woman be the same person (*homo*) as Jesus?

After examining the first question in metaphysical terms, Roland concludes that there would be different persons if an existing union were disrupted.<sup>16</sup> He then takes up the question of whether a woman could be the same person as Jesus. The argument turns on grammatical difficulties arising partly from the various ways of understanding *homo*—as generic human being, as a particular individual of either sex possessing human nature, and occasionally as a male person. Not one to shrink from the consequences, Roland states his conclusions boldly: “this woman and Jesus are the same man (*homo*)”

To the opposing position—that a woman is not a man—we say that this is false. Yes, indeed, this woman is a man because Jesus and this woman are the same person and the same man. Certainly I concede that a woman in so far as she is woman is not a man in so far as he is man, that is, femininity is not masculinity. But it does not follow therefore that a woman is not a man. This is a fallacy *secundum quid* and *simpliciter*. I say confidently that, given this situation, this man is this woman, and this woman is this man. Nor is this a valid argument: “femaleness is not maleness, therefore a woman is not a man” just as it is not valid to say “whiteness is not musical, therefore a white thing is not a musician.” In creatures it follows validly, “it is a woman therefore not a man” and vice versa. This however is not the case here, which is beyond nature. Therefore he speaks falsely when he says “It is impossible that a woman is a man.”

Further he declares

this is false: “This woman is not the son of God.” Indeed she is the son of God, since she is Jesus. Nor is there a grammatical discord. And even if there were, as long as the sense is true, it doesn't matter much. But it is not grammatically dissonant, since this term “son” is

<sup>16</sup> He cites Algazel on the causes of things, and Boethius on difference in number caused by variation in accidents, *Summae Magistri Rolandi Cremonensis*, 3 q. 14 ed. A. Cortesi (Bergamo: Edizioni Monumenta Bergomensia, 1962–), 7–47.

not taken adjectivally of this noun "woman", but is rather taken substantively.<sup>17</sup>

Writing only a few years after Roland, Albert the Great remakes the question almost entirely and gives it definitive direction for the remainder of the middle ages. He no longer enquires whether there are reasons why Christ could not be female, but rather, for the first time, phrases the question "Whether Christ ought to have (*debut*) assumed humanity in the female sex?"<sup>18</sup> The body of the question is highly innovative as well, with an almost entirely new set of presuppositions, arguments and responses. He advances two possible reasons why Christ should have been a woman. The first is based on a symmetry requirement for salvation history—just as death entered by a woman, so life ought to begin from a woman. The second, referring to the valiant woman (Prov. 30), is based on Christ imaging the maternal role of the second person of the Trinity—the Son who is Wisdom, gave birth as if a woman, like one who conceives, forms and gives birth to us from the entrails of charity.

The first two arguments Albert presents in opposition are based on ecclesiastical propriety. Since women ought not to preach, Christ who was sent for a proclamation (*annuntiandum*) ought not to be female. He cites also the Pauline argument that a woman could not be the head of the Church. Albert advances, also for the first time, Aristotle's argument that a woman is a defective man, and argues that since Christ ought to represent perfection, not an imperfection of nature, He should be incarnate as a man.<sup>19</sup> Finally, alluding to an argument of Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo*, he suggests that the fullness of creation would be impaired if God did not complete the cycle of ways of producing humans. Having already produced Adam without either

<sup>17</sup> Ad illud quod dicit contra—femina non est vir—dicimus quod falsum est. Immo ista femina est vir, quia sunt eadem persona et idem homo Iehsus et hec femina. Bene concedo quod femina in quantum femina non est vir in quantum vir, idest feminitas non est virilitas. Sed non sequitur . . . ergo femina non est vir. Et est fallacia secundum quid et simpliciter. Confidenter dico quod, facta illa positione, iste vir est ista femina, et hec femina est iste vir. . . . Nec valet istud argumentum: "feminitas non est virilitas, ergo femina non est vir," sicut non valet: albedo non est musica, ergo album non est musicum. In creaturis bene sequitur: est femina, ergo non est vir, et e converso. Hic autem non est ita, quia supra naturam est hoc. Falsum ergo dixit quando dixit: "Impossibile est quod femina sit vir." . . . ista est falsa: "Ista femina non est filius Dei." Immo est filius Dei, quoniam est Iehsus, ergo est filius Dei. Nec gramatica dissonat. Et etiamsi gramatica dissonaret, ex quo sensus esset verus non esset multum curandum. Sed gramatica non dissonat, quoniam iste terminus filius non adiectivatur huic nomini femina, sed potius substantie tenetur. Ibid., 45–46.

<sup>18</sup> *Libros sententiarum*, III, d. 12, a. 10, in *Opera omnia*, ed. A. Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1890), 28:234.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Aristotle *De Generatione Animalium* 737a26–30.

man or woman, Eve from a man without a woman, and Abel from a man and a woman, there remained only to produce the virgin man from the virgin woman. Albert's treatment also marks the last appearance of son/daughter arguments with an objection that there is no genus in which son and daughter are the same. However, if Christ were female He would then be eternally a son and temporally a daughter, and by the communication of properties, He would thus be both, since predicates of the unified person of Christ could not belong only to His divine or human nature. Albert's solution concedes the arguments *in contra*, which then become staples of the genre, destined to be repeated in some combination by almost all subsequent commentators. Equally long-lasting is his response to the reasons urged for why Christ should have been a woman. Using different events to satisfy the symmetry principle, he argues that reparation does correspond to ruin, but through the male. Although death was introduced by a woman, it was propagated by a man, who is more rightly the principle of generation by which death is transmitted, therefore life should also be brought by the male.<sup>20</sup> Finally the correct understanding of Christ as maternal shows only a spiritual fecundity, which need not require a female incarnation.<sup>21</sup>

When only a few years later Bonaventure takes up the issues surrounding the sex of Christ's assumed nature, he rephrases the question again, this time as "whether it would have been fitting (*decuerit*) for God to assume the female sex for the restoration of the human race."<sup>22</sup> He repeats the principle that reparation corresponds to ruin, but also adds several new arguments. One is drawn from a sermon of Chrysostom, to the effect that God should choose the weaker sex since His power is better displayed by a woman's victory over the devil. Another suggests that since it is equally possible for a rational spirit, or the uncreated spirit, to unite itself to either a man or a woman then the Son of God ought to assume the female sex which is more sunk in wretchedness. He would thus show more clearly that He came to lighten our affliction. Finally, Bonaventure argues that offspring ought to resemble their source (*principio*), thus Christ should be a woman as was the Virgin.

Bonaventure's presentation of the opposing argument first repeats that a woman is a defective man, then elaborates slightly an objection based on the

<sup>20</sup> Albert draws here on Augustine *De agone christiano* 22.24 (PL 40. 302–3).

<sup>21</sup> In the later *Summae Theologiae*, 2nd pt., treatise 12, q. 82, pt. 2, *solutio*, on the formation of women, Albert elaborates on the superiority of men from creation. Citing Paul, Aristotle's *Politics*, and Proverbs he concludes that "It is certain that simply speaking man is more worthy than woman." (Dicendum, quod pro certo simpliciter loquendo vir dignior est mulier.) Any equality between them is *secundum quid*. While women have special strengths relating to the requirements of their sex, in whatever the sexes share, man is the head and more worthy. *Opera omnia*, 33:125–26.

<sup>22</sup> *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum*, III, d. 12, a. 3, q. 1, 270–71.



Pauline view that a woman ought not to be head of the Church. It would be a perversion of order, he contends, since according to the Apostle, the head of a woman is man. God, therefore, ought not to do something that would be destructive of the order He came to restore. Bonaventure combines arguments for Christ as fertile and as the single source of regeneration. The male sex is the principle of all carnal generation since from one man, all come: so also the principle of spiritual generation ought to be male. And finally he draws from Anselm the argument that because of the communication of properties, if Christ were a female, one ought to use the names "Goddess" and "Daughter" for the persons of the Trinity.

Bonaventure's resolution is direct: "without doubt God ought not to assume the female sex, . . . because it is not of equal worth. . . . The male sex is more excellent in worth in originating; in power in acting; in authority in ruling."<sup>23</sup> Bonaventure supports this position by citing Aristotle's view that the male is active, the female passive. The basis of male superiority lies in its more active power, because of which it is more powerful in itself and in its name (*vir*).<sup>24</sup> Bonaventure's response to the contrary view is that restoration does mirror ruin, since each is begun in the woman in an inchoate way and is consummated in the man. While conceding that it is desirable to show the triumph of weakness, Bonaventure counters that Christ conquers not only by fragility, through suffering, but also by power, in resurrecting, and that this is more suitable to the male sex than the female. The communication of properties in the Incarnation requires that the most noble spirit be united to the most noble sex in the most noble union. Finally, although in the ordinary course of nature an offspring ought to be like its principle, this does not hold in the present case. The Virgin's conception was initiated and aided by the Holy Spirit and for that reason the offspring ought to have the sex chosen by the Holy Spirit rather than that found in the mother. Further, Bonaventure stipulates that such a generation is not degeneration, but that it is in accord with the nature of a woman to conceive a male; indeed, women naturally desire a son more than a daughter.

In the second question of this article, Bonaventure argues that since Christ came equally for the salvation of both sexes, it would seem that he ought to assume human nature either in both sexes or from both sexes. To assume both sexes in one person would be abominable, and to assume humanity in two persons would be superfluous. His response is based on the

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 271. Dicendum, quod absque dubio non ita decuit Deum assumere sexum femineum . . . quia muliebris sexus non est tantae dignitatis. . . . Excellit enim sexus virilis muliebrem et quantum ad dignitatem in principiando, et quantum ad virtutem in agendo, et quantum ad auctoritatem in praesidendo.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. . . . quoniam viri est agere, et mulieris est pati. Unde plus habet sexus virilis de virtute activa, propter quod et robustior est et re et nominatione.

greater dignity of the male sex which renders it the more fitting.<sup>25</sup> His arguments rests on the foundation of decorum. Without doubt, he asserts, Christ could have assumed flesh if He wished from the union of man and woman, or even from a man alone, but it is properly a question of harmonious suitability.<sup>26</sup>

When Thomas Aquinas addresses both these questions, he does so explicitly under the general topic of appropriateness.<sup>27</sup> He begins with the most basic question, whether Christ ought to have any sex at all, giving three reasons why no sex is appropriate. First, Christ's body signifies the mystical body in which there is no difference of sexes, second, sex is ordered toward carnal generation, but this does not concern Christ since He is the principle of humanity by spiritual rather than carnal birth, and third, even created spirits are indifferent to distinctions of sex—therefore an uncreated spirit is even less determined by sex. Therefore Christ ought either to assume both sexes or neither. Rejecting the idea of a hermaphrodite God as monstrous, Aquinas argues that the restoration of human nature requires that all its parts and properties be redeemed. As sex is a perfection of human nature, Christ must assume one of the sexes. It is urged that since Christ assumed the defect of our nature, therefore He should assume the female sex since its weakness is a defect. This does not seem compelling to Aquinas, however, as it is not thought relevant to the work of redemption.

The other arguments he advances for the view that Christ should choose the female sex are generally familiar and are still based on women's weakness. But each is given a new application: in the first, reparation corresponds to ruin not by mirroring but by opposition. Just as the principle of perdition was the frailer nature, so the principle of reparation ought to be the stronger nature. But, without reconciling them, he immediately adds the more common version—sin was not introduced by a woman, but only initiated, so restoration is initiated by a woman and perfected by a man.<sup>28</sup> In another interesting turn, Aquinas counters the argument that the victory of a weak woman gives praise to God with the view that glory comes not only from the

<sup>25</sup> Ibid , q 2, 272

<sup>26</sup> Ibid Dicendum, quod Christus absque dubio potuit carnem assumere, si voluisset, de viro et mulier, vel etiam de viro tantum, sicut assumpsit in mulier tantum Sed tamen non fuisset ita congruum, sicut nunc, et hoc multiplici ratione congruentiae, ob quam magis decebat, ut carnem sumeret de sola muliere

<sup>27</sup> *Scriptum super sententias Magistri Petri Lombardi*, III, d 12, q 3, ed M F Moos (Paris Lethielleux, 1933), 3 385 Under the general heading of the question, "De congruitate quantum ad sexum" we find article 1, "Utrum Christus debuerit aliquem sexum accipere "

<sup>28</sup> Only Durand of St Pourcain follows this two-fold approach to the topos *In Petri Lombardi Sententias Theologicas Commentariorum* (Venice 1571, reprint Ridgewood N J Gregg Press, 1964), III *Sent* , d 12, q 3, 235

infirmity of the victor, but also from the magnitude of the victory and the congruence of the fighters. Aquinas emphasizes that he is not speaking of “the power of God . . . but of appropriateness, . . . because Christ came as teacher, ruler, and defender of the human race, which are not fitting for women.”<sup>29</sup>

The emphasis on masculine appropriateness remains the cornerstone of subsequent solutions. The next two authors, Peter of Tarantaise (Innocent V) and Richard of Middleton ask whether it was fitting (*congruum*) for the son of God to assume human nature in the masculine sex.<sup>30</sup>

From this point on, the question is consistently blended with others in *III Sent.*, d. 12. Only Henry of Gorkum poses it separately, using the old-fashioned formulation of whether it would be possible for Christ to have been born a woman, and only Denis the Carthusian treats it at any length. The material becomes very standardized, as familiar objections are recycled with increasingly pat responses.

Although there is little new argument, there are still points of interest. Peter of Tarantaise concludes his question with a remark occasioned by Lombard's comment that some think it would be possible for Christ to be a

<sup>29</sup> Dicendum quod non loquimur hic de potentia Dei, quia ipse potuit assumere quale corpus voluit. De congruitate autem loquendo, quia Christus venit ut doctor et rector et propugnator humani generis: quae mulieri non competunt; ideo nec competens fuit quod sexum femineum assumeret. Aquinas, 387. Aquinas reiterates the argument based on the greater dignity and suitability of the masculine sex in his *Summa Theologiae* III, 31, 5, 2616b–2617b where he again discusses Christ's taking flesh from the female sex, “Utrum decuerit Christum nasci de femina.” In this case the emphasis is strongly on demonstrating Christ's liberation of both sexes.

<sup>30</sup> “An congruenter assumpserit Deus naturam in sexu virili,” Peter of Tarantaise, *Innocentii Quinti Pontificis Maximi in IV Libros Sententiarum Commentaria*, ed. T. Turcus and J. B. de Marinis (Toulouse: 1652; reprint Ridgewood, N.J.: Gregg Press, 1964), *III Sent.*, d. 12, a. 4. “Utrum congruum fuerit filium Dei assumere naturam humanam in sexu masculino,” Richard of Middleton, *Super quatuor Libros Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, ed. L. Silvestrio a Sancto (Brescia: 1591; reprint Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1963) *III Sent.*, d. 12, a. 3, q. 1. Middleton's conclusion to the question of whether Christ should have assumed human nature from a man or a woman gives some insight into why female inappropriateness so seldom needed to be spelled out or argued for. He glosses the words “that man was born of woman” to explain that it “is to call the mother of Christ ‘woman’ not because she is corrupted, but on account of sex: because the words ‘of woman’ are sometimes taken according to the meaning of corruption, as in Matthew 10.” (Ille vir de foemina natus est, hic vocatur Christi mater, foemina, non quia corrupta, sed propter sexum: quod ideo dico, quia nomen feminae, et mulieris aliquando accipitur secundum quod sonat corruptionem, ut Matth. 10.)

Cf. Alain de Lille, whose *Distinctiones dictionum theologicarum* lists four or five neutral or positive meanings for biblical use of the word *mulier* as well as the following: corruption (in the sense of having flesh), sensuality, heresy, idolatry, carnal delight, weak-mindedness, vice, pride and vainglory. (PL 10.865–66). For a cautionary note about interpretation, see n. 47 below.

woman. After presenting a contrary position—that anything in the least unsuitable is impossible to God, but it would be unsuitable for a woman to be head of the Church—Peter offers an insightful solution: “it is not possible *de potentia ordinata*, however much it is possible *de potentia absoluta*. Or it would be better said that if God did do it, it would not be unsuitable.”<sup>31</sup> Durand of St. Pourcain is notable only for ignoring the issue of appropriateness altogether to declare simply that Christ “. . . ought to assume it [human nature] in the male sex, not the female.”<sup>32</sup>

Denis the Carthusian frames the issue most strongly in terms of propriety: “The Son of God ought not to assume human nature except in the more excellent sex, namely, the male,” stating “it was more decent for the Son of God to assume human nature in the male sex than in the womanly.”<sup>33</sup> He provides a fairly comprehensive survey of the material, listing eight authors, “and others,” who have written on the subject, and summarizing two opinions more fully. In presenting Bonaventure’s views, he rewrites Bonaventure’s statement that the male sex is more active and stronger both in itself and in its name (*vir*), asserting the male’s greater strength in the use of reason and robustness of body. Again, his summary of Aquinas’s arguments goes beyond Thomas’s expressed statement that women are not suitable for the public roles of preaching, teaching, defending, ruling or giving laws, to add that because of their subjection, they may not discuss or dispute both sides of a question.<sup>34</sup> Denis reiterates the strongly disapproving tone of his

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 86. Potest dici quod non potuit de potentia ordinata, quamvis potuerit de potentia absoluta. Vel melius dicendum quod si Deus fecisset, non esset inconveniens. Albert the Great was one of the earliest to formulate explicitly the distinction of absolute and ordained powers, although he suggests it is already commonly used. Cf. Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 48. The distinction is certainly implied in Aquinas’s solution to this question, n. 29 above.

Drawing on Scotus’s commentary on the question on the ordination of women, (*Quaestiones in quartum librum Sententiarum*, IV Sent., d. 25, q. 3) the Scotist compilation stresses the opposite view of God performing an unsuitable action, while allowing that the deciding factor in suitability may be the fall: “nature does not permit, at least since the fall, that a woman holds the outstanding rank in the human species. Therefore it was more suitable for Christ to take the body of the more excellent sex.” (unde natura non permittit, saltem post lapsum, mulierem tenere gradum eminentem in specie humana. . . . Igitur magis conveniens fuisset Christum accipere corpus de sexu praestantiori, quam de foemina.) The conclusion indicates the compiler feels himself on firm ground: “respondeo, ea ratione probari Christum sexum mulierem assumere non debuisse, quod verissimum est.” Montefortino, 335 (see n.8 above).

<sup>32</sup> III Sent., d. 12, q. 3, 235.

<sup>33</sup> In IV Libros Sententiarum (Tournai: Carthusiae S. M. de Pratis, 1896–1906), III Sent., d. 12, q. 3, 222–23, in a question about whether the Word should be born from the same race as we.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 223. “. . . ac sermocinando hinc inde discurrere.”

sources, and contributes his own emphasis: "above all, the Incarnate Word ought to assume the male sex. . . . certainly He should assume the male sex."<sup>35</sup> It is left to Biel, the last commentator, to spell out the consequences of God's choice: by assuming the male sex, Christ maintained, rather than perverted, the instituted order. But if He had assumed the female sex, "now He would prefer women to men, and deprive men of their natural dignity. As it is, however, He dignifies both because He assumed human nature in the male sex and took it from the virgin mother."<sup>36</sup> Having clearly defined the issue as one of relative human worth rather than divine possibility, the liberation of both sexes, or ecclesiastical propriety, Biel closes, saying "tantum de quaestione" (so much for this question). But surely there is more.

It is important to note that the query about the sex of Christ did not arise in any obvious way from Scripture, nor did the medievals find it debated in this form in patristic sources. Further, as a hypothetical counterfactual, the question's relevance to Christian practice is indirect at best, mediated by other issues such as the propriety of certain forms of pious language, or questions about how the grace of the redemption is transmitted through the sacraments. Its interest then, appears to lie in the theological climate of the middle ages, its long and curious history well illustrating Marcia Colish's assertion that early systematic theology responded to various practical concerns of the period.<sup>37</sup>

Although twelfth-century interest in naturalism is one likely early source for the question of the sex of Christ, the daily rounds of monastic piety may play a more important role in its origin. The question seems to emerge first in the context of the monks' identification with the role of women, evinced by their interest in a range of gender-related questions. As Caroline Bynum's work has shown, monastic interest in these questions goes beyond identification with the bride of the *Song of Songs* or the now familiar *topos* of the maternal Jesus.<sup>38</sup> An understanding of the monastic life as one of imitation of Christ through humility, suffering, and internalized obedience to the will of the Father served to foster the monks' characterizations of themselves as lowly, weak, and obedient, in short, as playing the role the world assigned to

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. Denis offers as his précis of Bonaventure's view, ". . . potissime decuit sexum virilem assumi a Verbo increato"; for Thomas's: ". . . omino decuit eum venire in sexu virili."

<sup>36</sup> *Collectorium circa quattuor libros Sententiarum*, III, d. 12, q. unica, a. 3, dub. 3., ed. Wilfrid Werbeck and Udo Hofman (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1973), 214. Si enim sexum femineum assumpsisset, iam feminas viris praetulisset et viros sua naturali dignitate privasset. Nunc autem utrumque dignificavit, quia ipse naturam in sexu virili assumpsit et eam de Virgine matre accepit.

<sup>37</sup> See n. 2 above.

<sup>38</sup> *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982).

women. The more grammatically oriented discussions of Anselm and the first commentators may well reflect the distinctive, word-centered spirituality cultivated by the monastic practices of *lectio divina* and scriptural exegesis (practices of scriptural exegesis developed by pious reading, meditation, and prayer).<sup>39</sup> But if, for whatever reasons, the question of God's gender originated with monastic authors, the institutionalized development of a more systematic theology of the Incarnation next gave it direction—as we see in Peter the Lombard and the scholastic commentators. The question of Christ's sex exemplified the intense struggles of late twelfth and early thirteenth-century theologians to settle the question of the unity or duality of Christ, and accorded well with the importance of speculative grammar in their discussions.<sup>40</sup>

Several intellectual and institutional changes contributed to the different tone of commentaries after the mid-thirteenth century as the question of Christ's sex was brought into service for different doctrinal duties. Incarnational theology in general had become more settled and issues about creation assumed greater prominence, as a result grammar gave way to metaphysics as the dominant tool of analysis. In religious life, friars replaced monks and the active apostolate replaced the cloistered life as models of spirituality. Clericalization became more pronounced. Systematic theology brought greater clarity to the definition of the sacraments and canon law regulated their celebration more closely. As a result, the distance between clergy and laity increased markedly, and clerical functions assumed ever greater importance in religious life. As the numbers of the ordained rose, so did the percentages of monks and friars who took Orders. The universities of northern Europe were dominated by theological faculties engaged in the refinement of doctrine and the training of clergy for pastoral, administrative and teaching positions. These developments shifted the focus of imitation of Christ toward more active roles and more ecclesiastical models—roles appropriate to men who preached, administered the sacraments and governed the Church. Arguments for God's incarnation as a woman based on the humility

<sup>39</sup> Cf. G. R. Evans, who suggests that Anselm's concern for grammatical propriety indicates his own struggle to develop a more precise and technical vocabulary for theology, "Inopes Verborum sunt Latini: Technical Language and Technical Terms in the Writings of St. Anselm and Some Commentators of the Mid-twelfth Century," *Archives d'Histoire Doctrinale et Littéraire du Moyen Âge* 51 (1976) 113–34, esp. 114–19. Marcia Colish argues that he sometimes uses "theological fitness" rather than grammar as his norm for linguistic propriety, "St. Anselm's Philosophy of Language Reconsidered," *Anselm Studies: An Occasional Journal* 1 (1983) 115–18.

<sup>40</sup> *Speculative grammar* is the name given to the view that language reflects reality and thus holds clues to understanding not only the world, but even God. For the conjunction of unity questions and speculative grammar, see Walter Principe, *William of Auxerre's Theology of the Hypostatic Union* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), 70–71.

of Christ and the weakness of women are now routinely countered by responses drawn from the more masculine, active and hierarchical roles of teaching, ruling and defending the faith. And since women were excluded and the discussion removed from a monastic context, the ways in which at least some monastic women had exercised authority in teaching and presiding became less visible.

The institutionalized university setting must also have played a part in altering theological debate. Although it still responds to practical ecclesiological and social concerns, much of the new theological literature originated in the requirements of university curriculum.<sup>41</sup> The emphasis on training clergy to fill pastoral and apologetic duties pushed theological speculation further toward formalization and the search for authoritative decisions. Additionally, the adoption of Aristotelian biology in the universities was a factor in rendering moot the question of the sex of Christ, since this biology stressed the activity of the male principle, and the inferiority of women.<sup>42</sup>

Lastly, the philosophical and theological distinction between God's absolute and ordained power increasingly framed the question of the sex of Christ as one of fitting harmony within the ordained plan of the world rather than as one of active alternate possibility.<sup>43</sup> Judgments of suitability or fittingness had always played an important role in grounding theological inquiry, especially in situations where Scripture or the Fathers offered little direct guidance.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, intuitions of what constitutes congruence are indispensable in the rationalist, systematizing work of the early scholastics in which "arguments and conclusions depended as much on internal coherence as on the teaching of Scripture or the church."<sup>45</sup> Words denoting suitability, propriety, or congruence abound in the *Sentence* literature. But as God's ordained power comes to be regarded as the usual or customary order of events, a different understanding of what is at stake arises. Things are as they are because it is more suitable, and in the last analysis, because God wills it. For thirteenth-century thinkers, it is less important to know that God could have willed it otherwise, than to learn from what He has in fact ordained. It is a perspective at once more aesthetic and less speculative, because it is more tied to existing hierarchies of power. In both respects, the social foundations of the question become much more apparent in defending judgments of congruence.

<sup>41</sup> See Colish's comments on early scholastic authors, "Systematic theology," 141–42.

<sup>42</sup> Note, however, that Christian incarnational theology poses a challenge to Aristotelian philosophical biology at least equal to the imagined possibility of a female Christ, in that it is Mary who must transmit human nature within the race of Adam.

<sup>43</sup> On the development of this distinction, see Oakley, chap. 3.

<sup>44</sup> Evans, "Inopes Verborum," 116–20; Colish, "St. Anselm," 117–18.

<sup>45</sup> Cardman, 582.

Related issues about women closely parallel the discussion of the question of the gender of God. The thirteenth century witnessed not only the clericalization of male religious models, but also the elaboration of a doctrine excluding women from Holy Orders; not only a renewed emphasis on preaching but also renewed restrictions on women's preaching, teaching and counselling roles even within their monasteries, together with imposition of increasingly strict enclosure. Many of the leading figures in the thirteenth-century discussion of the sex of Christ also play central roles in defining women's ecclesiastical impediments. For the question of women and Orders, *Sentence* commentaries (IV *Sent.*, d. 24–25) are also the locus of the debate, and the arguments display significant similarity in their development of doctrine; both emphasize issues of congruence, women's natural aptitude—or lack thereof—for certain offices, and finally the will of Christ as the determining point. In the question on Order, the authors grant that women do indeed sometimes exercise authority, issue judgment or show leadership, but they respond either by declaring that the forms of such activity available to women are irrelevant to the priesthood, or by proposing further limitations on such activities. They also stress the necessity of imaging the spiritual marriage of Christ to His Church which is now held to require a physically male image—unlike the spiritual motherhood of Christ which does not require a physically female expression of the image.<sup>46</sup>

No author explicitly links the question of women priests to that of a female Christ, but insofar as ordination arguments rest on the ability of the recipient to image Christ's masculinity in priesthood, it seems at best disingenuous, and nearly circular, to argue that Christ's incarnation in the male sex derives from the requirements of priesthood—teaching, preaching and ruling.<sup>47</sup> But with both the question of Christ's gender and the gender of priests apparently settled by the late thirteenth century, the treatment of our original question became predictable and routine. Had it not already been in the repertoire, it is difficult to imagine it would have arisen except in the manner of a donnish *jeu d'esprit*, such as Aquinas's question on the relative

<sup>46</sup> For an overview of this development, see Cardman. George Duby's comments on the importance of the relation of Christ and Church in defining the sacrament of marriage as both sacred and embodied are instructive; see, *The Knight, the Lady and the Priest: The Making of Modern Marriage in Medieval France* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 177–85.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Laqueur, however, argues that in the middle ages the social requirements of gender models overdetermine notions of physical sex; see, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). The complexity of applying this insight is illustrated by Caroline Bynum's analyses of the identification of women and bodiliness and of medieval women's depiction of the female body as the image of Christ's humanity. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), see esp. 260–69.



strengths of wine, rulers, women and truth.<sup>48</sup> I can only speculate about the reasons for the striking decline of interest in this question through the fourteenth century and the apparent resurgence of interest in the fifteenth. The emphasis on the appropriateness of the male sex first appears in the thirteenth century and continues through the fifteenth, with the crux of the question shifting from what was possible, to which option God ought to have chosen, then to explaining why it is better that things are as they are, and finally to saying little more than that God honors both sexes. It may be significant that the examination of how God honors both sexes is increasingly focussed during this period on the controversy about the Immaculate Conception—whether Mary, uniquely among human creatures, had been preserved from all taint of original sin, even at the moment of her conception. In the closing years of the thirteenth century and the early part of the fourteenth, consensus grew for affirmation of the doctrine. In the face of such surpassing grace, the issue of whether Christ might have chosen to become a woman Himself may have appeared superfluous, either as an indication of God's power or of His desire to show the redemption of all.<sup>49</sup>

For whatever reasons, it is clear that the question of the sex of God is no longer taken seriously in the fourteenth century. Both the lesser emphasis on issues of incarnation and the contemporary passion for questions of logic and modality are displayed in the more extreme forms of testing the limits of possibility. The voluntaristic strains of late medieval theology give new prominence to God's absolute freedom to arrange this world differently or to create another. Ockham, for example, argues that God could equally well have united the divine person to a stone or a donkey as to a human nature.<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, a new question with respect to a woman's body now became a prominent test of the limits of God's power. In this case, His power over the past is explored by asking, Could Christ restore a fallen virgin?<sup>51</sup>

The status of our question in the fifteenth century requires further investigation; the sample from that period is small but suggestive. It is notable that the question is kept in currency and that a high proportion of available commentaries do refer to it. On the other hand, the very abbreviated or nonexistent argumentation and the emphatic language suggest that

<sup>48</sup> *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, q. 14, a. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Scotus was instrumental in developing a solution to the implied contradiction of this doctrine with the doctrine of universal redemption. The first separate treatises in defense of the Immaculate Conception appeared in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, authored by Aureoli and Peter Thomas, neither of whom comments on the question of Christ's sex.

<sup>50</sup> William Ockham, III *Sent.*, q. 1, (OTh 6.33–34).

<sup>51</sup> See Oakley, chap. 3, for the history of the question. This question, which arose in the context of the rape of holy virgins, may provide an additional insight into why it is so difficult for the medievals to imagine a female Christ whose sufferings redeem the world.

the impetus for serious examination of the question is spent. It is at least possible that the climate of reform invited reaffirmation, if not reevaluation, of a wide spectrum of social and theological issues, within which questions of gender were noted as settled. If this is the correct explanation, then fifteenth-century *Sentence* commentaries would still demonstrate their ties to the practical concerns of the day.

Tracing the question of Christ's sex casts into historical relief contemporary theological controversies about gender. This issue is closely related to an assortment of medieval views about women; taken together, they show that the problems raised by imputing gender to the divine are wide-ranging and complex. They are difficult to avoid in a religion that proclaims the unsexed fatherhood of God and the salvific incarnation of Christ. To the extent that issues of possibility and appropriateness underlie the discussion, the solution to such problems can reasonably be expected to change as our understanding of gender develops. But the medieval example warns us that consistency, or even harmony, in supporting arguments of appropriateness may not be attainable. Nevertheless, the necessity to enter the discussion will be a recurrent occupational hazard for theologians as long as theology responds to the changing needs of church and society.

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