

languages gives access to classic but often forgotten texts on tolerance, freedom of conscience and peoples' rights.

Pierre Aubenque  
Université Paris-IV, Sorbonne  
Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

### Notes

1. Raymond Klibansky passed away in August 2005, at the age of 99.

Sylviane Agacinski, *Métaphysique des sexes. Masculin/Féminin aux sources du christianisme*. Seuil: La Librairie du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, 2005. 302 pp.

DOI: 10.1177/0392192106069023

In this book Sylviane Agacinski analyses the ancient construction of the Christian conception of the sexes, male primacy and sexuality. The choice is motivated by the profound influence of Christianity on our civilization. Since the core of doctrine was developed in the early part of the Christian era, Agacinski restricts her field of investigation to the period from the 2nd to the 5th century. She traces the way in which ancient positions were modified, discussed and contested by the Fathers of the Church, then institutionalized.

The four chapters are framed by an introduction and exposition of metaphysical positions in Greek antiquity and by a conclusion; there is no bibliography or index. The main sources – among many others – are Clement of Alexandria (died c. 216), Tertullian (160–220), Origen (c. 185–254), Gregory of Nyssa (335–90), Ambrose of Milan (339–97) and Augustine (354–430). As the author relies on French translations of the texts, no new exegesis in the philological area is to be expected. Although Agacinski's reflections on the Christianity of the early centuries may surprise and alarm today's reader, they are not in fact relevant to the understanding of her own time. I present two central themes that recur in the book, men's appropriation of the female and the sexualization of metaphysics, before moving on to the topical theme of the veil and finally a critique.

### Dual meaning

Agacinski states that she found in the patristic works what she was seeking: 'monotheistic androcentrism' and 'traces of a male imaginary'. Christian metaphysics is associated with a male gaze and - I would add - a male appetite. Indeed the female appears only as the negative of man and Agacinski shows how the interplay of interpretations has led to this appropriation. However, her thesis is more original in that she shows how far areas of metaphysics such as temporality, freedom or the relationship between mind and soul were engendered, even sexualized. Thus

the phrase 'metaphysics of the sexes' takes on its second meaning: Christian metaphysics is a 'sexualized metaphysics'.

### Appropriation of the female.

Agacinski wishes 'to demonstrate that there is in Plato's, then in Christian philosophy a construction of the sexes that is both metaphysical and androcentric'. Regarding the 'construction of the sexes' it should be stressed that the author does not mean that relations between the sexes were prefigured in metaphysics. On the contrary, she notes at several points that hierarchical relations were already deeply rooted in Mediterranean societies. Christian thought justified them by constructing a hierarchical ontology. One of the book's merits is that it highlights the central role of interpretation in establishing the metaphysics of the sexes, which presupposes 'the principle that meaning is always hidden, veiled'. The cover of the book reproduces a picture illustrating the result of this process in all its radical effect. It is the image of the creation of Eve, whom a white-bearded man is drawing from the side of another bearded man lying on the ground in a relaxed or even bored posture. Here the upending of values and priorities is complete, as Paul had already expressed it: 'Man was not drawn out of woman but woman from man.' Continuing trends that already existed among the Greeks, Christianity manages to make birth, and procreation in general, a male affair. This is the main theme of the book: the 'Christian regeneration of humanity' operated through new notions about birth and kinship. Bodily generation is moved towards an autonomous male fecundity, the incarnation: the Spirit takes bodily shape, the Word becomes flesh. At the same time the survival of the self is ensured by the resurrection, which takes over from mortals' methods of becoming immortal (well established since Plato's *Symposium*), that is, through their offspring, their works or their teaching.

### Sexualized metaphysics

The creation of Adam is identified with that of the intelligence, the creation of Eve his helpmeet is interpreted as the birth of sensation, supporting the intelligence. The inner faculties, virtues and vices become sexed in such a way that the relationship of domination is automatic. People are all female in their desire, male in their mind and control of the passions. Augustine introduced the hierarchy within the Spirit itself by engendering the two uses of reason, active and contemplative. In itself reason is gender-neutral. It is bodily difference that gives rise to a spiritual difference for the soul, originally asexual: natural weakness exposes woman more to temptations, which thus explains why her soul stoops towards practical things and why she becomes the symbol of desire and of the *reason that acts* in time. And so woman's soul loses its resemblance to God.

Even time is sexualized: 'Man was made for eternity, woman made him fall into time.' Mary enables Christ to enter time. The transcendent relationship between God and man or Spirit and flesh – by analogy with the father's invident relation of

kinship to the son – supersedes the immanent, observable relationship between mother and children. Furthermore we abandon the prospect of an unlimited future with the advent of Christ. In saying that ‘time is short’ Paul announces ‘the end of history in the Christian sense’, and by that very fact the absence of future on earth, so implying the devaluing of procreation and encouraging asceticism. Nonetheless a twofold relation to time is established: life according to the Spirit requires that time be transcended, but also that we should exist in time without changing anything. Equality is in the Spirit alone. The ‘neither male nor female’ of the Epistle to the Galatians does not foretell the end of subordinations. Quite the opposite, the engendering of ontology leads to a strengthening of the hierarchy of the sexes such that they become symbols of metaphysics. Thus woman is the living signifier of subordination of flesh to spirit. The dominations are systematically interwoven. The cases of the many female martyrs are not an exception to the rule because they are interpreted as masculinized women (145–53).

### The veil and the beard

Since every woman symbolizes subordination ‘she must have a power over her head, as indicated by the veil, a sign that she must submit to restraint’. The chapter section entitled ‘The veil and the beard’ (169–88) tackles a subject that is highly topical. However, Agacinski does not draw any conclusions for our times. She merely emphasizes that wearing the veil was a custom among women in ancient Mediterranean cultures and that it expressed their submission to their husbands. The Church Fathers’ interpretations only served to justify and tighten those rules. And so we find the veil being enforced for all women. Thus subordination of wife to husband was reinforced by that of women to men in general. The ontological hierarchy here goes beyond conjugal inequity. Following Paul’s pronouncement depriving women of the right to speak in church and teach, Tertullian strengthened the male monopoly of authority in social life – ‘The veil is their yoke’ – and in the church by rejecting any priestly function for women (the right to baptize, offer the sacrifice, etc.).

The veil played a special part in marriage. There was a custom of covering a gift: the ‘oblation veil’ thus applied to the woman who was given to her husband by her family. In both Greece and Rome girls were veiled during this transition. It was also customary for the bride to be carried into her husband’s house to indicate that she did not approach of her own free will. According to Plutarch this ritual meant that henceforth her outings hung on her husband’s decision.

On the man’s side we find another spectacular reversal performed by interpretation: far from being an indicator of animal nature, hairiness signified superior character, and even spirit and wisdom. A beard and body hair were marks of the privileged position given to men by God. Suppressing traditional signs of the sexes, such as the male body-hair removal common at the time, was condemned. Men’s obligation to appear bareheaded – they were forbidden to wear the veil – also meant, by analogy between veil and long hair, that they had to cut the hair on their head. Thus the difference between the sexes was reinforced while at the same time sexuality was suppressed.

## Critique

Curious readers do not receive any explanation as to when and how the requirement to wear the veil disappeared from Christianity, though the ban on priestly duties was retained. We learn only that once the ascetic period of the early centuries was over and the Messiah's return appeared to recede, motherhood regained its moral value so much so that it became woman's salvation.

This leads me to note two structural weaknesses in the book. First, apart from the initial thesis, there is no *concrete explanation* of the relevance of discussions in antiquity for issues that concern us today – except for some references to Freud who leads the author astray in the reception of Plato. This would not be serious, merely regrettable, if she did not attempt in addition to come to the following general conclusion: 'Philosophy and theology are concerned to neutralize sexual alterity . . . Resisting [268] that neutralization means recognizing the irreducible openness of difference, of which the sexes are a kind of schema. There is no human race but a heterogeneous humanity which can only ever be seen as plural.' This position remains quite abstract but it is connected with the author's rejection of androgyny: it would not make any difference whether the first human Adam was male or androgynous. Following Freud's interpretation of androgyny as a longing for lost completeness, she goes further in identifying it generally with man's appropriation of the female. Worse still, she characterizes 'nostalgia for the one' as 'the main source of all subordinations', even though *rejection* of longing for androgynous completeness by psychoanalysis was part of the system that included the phallogocentric sexualization of the Adam and Eve myth, that is, of male domination. Furthermore, even if Agacinski is correct in stating that the ancient ideas of androgyny did not in any way prevent the neutralization of the female in patristics, we have to take account of the fact that this neutralization was effected by thinkers rooted in patriarchal cultures. It is hard to see how this process could be generalized and applied to a culture of equality – and she admits that times have changed: 'It may be that the egalitarian idea of humanity's sexual bilaterality never existed before our time.' The author shows that, in a culture where one of the sexes was already dominant, the idea of androgyny did not change anything for the better. But she does not put forward any argument against the position that the ideal of androgyny might be part of a metaphysics of the sexes for an egalitarian society (cf. Marcuse).

The second structural criticism concerns the absence of a precise reading of the original texts. Often the lack of taking into account pertinent research on the topics discussed leads to dissatisfaction and even uneasiness at certain points. For instance it is completely erroneous to talk of 'the platonic ideal of merging love' (136) because that ideal, put by Plato into the mouth of Aristophanes, is explicitly refuted in the *Symposium*. As for faithfulness to the original texts, doubts remain: she explains that in Aristophanes' speech one of the four (*sic!*) types of human being, that is, women who love women, is described pejoratively: 'the word *tribade* itself was pejorative, even obscene', coming from the 'verb *tribein* which means "to rub"' (27). In fact the word *tribade* is used in modern translations, but the Greek word in Plato is *hetairis-triai*' (*Symposium*, 191e).

## **Conclusion**

Monotheism, androcentrism, ethnocentrism: according to Agacinski they are all rooted in a logic of reduction of difference, of alterity, from the multiple to the one, and from the temporal to the eternal. It follows directly that no monotheism is compatible with a position of difference Agacinski-style. 'In this sense the question of the sexes is always a metaphysical question.' But she does not raise the issue of how men came to position themselves on the dominant side in the culture of interpreting writing – which existed long before Christianity. Was it due to a domination that already existed before the invention of writing? Or did this domination get established at the same time as writing and did it end with the end of written texts' medial predominance, as Christina von Braun argues? In both cases the question arises as to the actual pertinence of Agacinski's ideas. If written texts and their interpretation are no longer predominant, the consequences Agacinski draws from the manoeuvres of script interpretation are not relevant any more. On the other hand, if male domination preceded the culture of writing, the question of relevance is merely shifted: why should we still be concerned with metaphysical epiphenomena that are symptoms of a past social disease, if the disease has been eradicated?

Michael Groneberg  
Fribourg University, Switzerland  
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell