

ANETA GAWKOWSKA  
University of Warsaw  
Institute of Applied Social Sciences

## Post-secular Sex-Gender Reconciliation according to New Feminism

**Abstract:** The text presents and discusses some major theses of the New Feminism inspired by the Catholic teaching on woman. It focuses particularly on the manner of understanding of the links between sex and gender and the analogical relation between nature and culture/society. The two realities seem to be closely connected (reconciled) in New Feminist arguments on the basis of the premodern (and in a sense late modern), pre-dualistic way of understanding nature, natural law, sexuality, and consequently, the feminine mode of nature. This way of comprehending nature is motivated by the post-secular theological source of the specific kind of feminism analyzed in the text.

**Keywords:** New Feminism, sex, gender, reconciliation, theology, body.

### New Feminism?... What Is That?

It seems that for several decades already the word “feminism” should rather be used in plural. Although all the kinds of feminisms claim that they promote the rights of women and fight for the equality of women and men, the differences between particular ways of understanding and performing these goals are so great that they justify speaking about *feminisms* rather than about one movement or one stream of thought. The one umbrella term “feminism” is still used, though, probably because of the traditional way of calling any pro-women movement this way and maybe also due to the tendency of simplification and generalization, which makes life a bit easier by allowing us to refer to the popular mainstream even in situations when we should be sensitive to the differing intricacies.

The so-called New Feminism is a clear case in point because it is a very particular type of feminism, largely differing from most other types of feminisms or even opposed to major types of feminism. And yet, it is described with this name and treated as a kind of feminism, even if a very original one. In the history of the feminist movement/s there were many of them calling themselves “new”. They either promoted a more radical version of something perceived as already old or they called for the new comeback of the original goals of feminism<sup>1</sup>. The New Feminism which I present and analyze here has been inspired by the Catholic teaching on woman, precisely by the argumentation used by John Paul II, who used the words “new feminism” in one of his encyclicals. (Although its proponents do not use capital letters for the name of this particular feminism, I decided to use them in order to differentiate this New Feminism from other new feminisms present on the historical market of ideas). As it stemmed from a religious source, it can be judged as an example of a post-secular thinking within the contemporary variety of feminisms.

The New Feminists openly declare the Catholic roots of their claims on the promotion of women in society. They invoke the particular quotation from the Pope’s document<sup>2</sup> where he called women to promote this new kind of feminism and they draw their reflections from the theological basis. And yet, they also ground their arguments on the rational view of nature metaphysically understood and thus available for all people, not just the believers of any particular religion or denomination. In other words, the New Feminists develop their claims on the basis of the anthropological philosophy of nature concerning human sexuality, but they also make clear that a particular religion has constituted an important source of their enlightenment, inspiration, and empowerment within their feminine identity.

Women like Michele M. Schumacher, Sr. Prudence Allen, Mary Ann Glendon, Helen Alvaré, Janne Haaland Matlary, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Mary Rousseau, Jennifer Ferrara, Beatriz Vollmer Coles, and others who either identify themselves with this stream of feminism or have been at some point identified as New Feminists because of their views, express the fact that their inspiration largely came from the theology of woman and theology of relations between men and women, better known as the so called “theology of the body”<sup>3</sup>. In order to understand better what

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University of Warsaw, Institute of Applied Social Sciences, mail: aneta.gawkowska@uw.edu.pl

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the topic of the broad spectrum of feminisms see e.g. R. Putnam Tong, *The Feminist Thought. A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 3rd ed., Westview Press, Boulder 2013. More on the analysis of the New Feminism within a broader context of other feminist currents and within the background of the papal development of the concept of reconciliation can be found in my book published in Polish entitled *Skandal i ekstaza. Nowy Feminizm na tle koncepcji pojednania według Jana Pawła II* [Scandal and Ecstasy. The New Feminism within the Background of the Concept of Reconciliation According to John Paul II], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2015).

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 99. I will quote it *in extenso* later in the article.

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them. A Theology of the Body*, translation, Introduction, and Index by Michael Waldstein, Pauline Books and Media, Boston 2006.

New Feminism is, we have to devote at least a few sentences to the topic of this both theological and philosophical source of New Feminist thinking.

### The Non-Secular Source

The so-called theology of the body actually was, more precisely speaking, the theology of sexuality, which was presented at the beginning of his pontificate by John Paul II. It was a collection of 129 catecheses, in which the Polish pope analyzed the question of meaning of the sexual differentiation of humanity in the light of the Bible. His reflections, however, were not restricted to theology. References to the biblical text provided the starting points for long commentaries of the philosophical, anthropological, and socio-cultural character. From the perspective of the later created New Feminism the main motives presented there were the following: 1) man and woman are equal in human nature, yet different and complementary in terms of their sexuality (both in the biblical sources and as confirmed by the observation of human experience); 2) the complementary differences are not seen as opposite, conflictual, or strictly defined, but rather subtle and made for mutual loving unions; 3) these deep unions are particularly visible in marriages, but they also somehow permeate all social relations by raising human awareness of the necessity of making a gift of oneself to others in order to achieve personal fulfilment (similar to the mutual self-giving of persons within the loving couple); and on the theological level, 3) the natural union of love (expressed strongly and tangibly in the sexual act) makes it possible for people to at least partially experience the loving union of the Triune God, the loving union of Christ and the Church, and the loving union of God and humanity redeemed in an act of God's self-giving love. Theology and philosophy are closely intertwined there in order to delve deeply into the meaning of sexual differentiation of persons. The meaning ascribed to it is connected with constituting a sign of love understood philosophically and Love understood theologically, namely the loving God. Man and woman with their sexual differentiation need each other to realize the importance of loving relations of persons. Both the beginning and end of love, however, is provided by God in this holistic theological vision, so ultimately, both man and woman are independent of each other in relation to their Creator, whose love liberates them both, but especially frees woman from the improper dependence on man (This historical dependence had been obvious in all cultures before the Christian revolution in that matter and even after that still to a large extent permeated the social life).

The collection of the theology of the body pertained to both sexes but it provided an important and wide framework for developing the theology of woman in several later papal documents, like e.g. Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Woman *Mulieris Dignitatem* published in 1988, Letter to Women *A Ciascuna di Voi*

(written before the IV Beijing UN Conference on Women) as well as several other letters and speeches published in 1995 around the Beijing Conference. On top of that there were important fragments devoted to women in many documents, e.g. *Laborem Exercens*, *Christifideles Laici*, and of course the one devoted to the dignity of human life, namely *Evangelium Vitae*. As it is quite well known, the Catholic view on sexual love is strongly linked with the issue of fecundity understood both physically and spiritually. Love by its very nature is supposed to be directed towards creativity. So, necessarily, the reflections on sexuality and femininity must lead to the special treatment of motherhood (both biological and spiritual) as essential for the feminine identity. Let us look at the following important quotes from John Paul II in this context.

The first two come from the aforementioned *Mulieris Dignitatem* and they revolve around the feminine symbolizing human receptivity towards God (within the analogy of relation between the Bridegroom and the Bride): „In the Church every human being – male and female – is the »Bride«, in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person”<sup>4</sup>. A woman makes it clear, however, by being receptive from her very nature: “The analogy of the Bridegroom and the Bride speaks of the love with which every human being – man and woman – is loved by God in Christ. But in the context of the biblical analogy and the text's interior logic, it is precisely the woman – the bride – who manifests this truth to everyone”<sup>5</sup>. The third quote describes the vision of the feminine creative response to the gift of love, namely the bearing of a child as the fruit of loving as well as in a sense bearing the great change of culture in order to make it more sensitive to the value of the person: „In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a »new feminism« which rejects the temptation of imitating models of »male domination«, in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation. (...) You are called to bear witness to the meaning of genuine love, of that gift of self and of that acceptance of others which are present in a special way in the relationship of husband and wife, but which ought also to be at the heart of every other interpersonal relationship. (...) A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness. Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health” (*Evangelium vitae*, no. 99).

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<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

So, theologically speaking, three issues come to the fore: a woman represents humanity in relation to God (in particular she is a sign of human receptivity towards God's gifts of creation and grace); the existence of a woman, sexually different from man, allows the human persons to experience deep interpersonal communion as the image of the Godlike exchange of love; and finally, a woman as the potential or actual biological mother signifies the value of each new personal life being the effect of a loving act of complementary couple, which has a strong spiritual meaning of fecundity of love in the image of the Trinity. So, in fact, before and above stressing equality of man and woman, the New Feminist source hidden in the reflections of theological anthropology of sexuality carry the higher meaning of locating the essence of femininity in signifying the possibility of *actualizing love* and *fulfilling humanity* both in its natural and supernatural sense. In other words, without a woman (i.e. without the sexual differentiation) love in its richness of spirituality, physicality, or materiality would not be available for human beings.

This last sentence takes us smoothly to uncovering the pretty secular message about love as necessary for the flourishing of people. As one can see, however, the line between the secular and the non-secular is not drawn or kept clearly. It comes as no surprise because the post-secular thinking links the two realities very closely and, in a sense, naturally. So, it is hardly possible to speak exclusively about the one or the other area in separation from one another. Yet, I will try now to move to the secular aspect of the New Feminist thought, remembering however, that it is directly inspired by what has just been described in this paragraph as the theological source, so the links will need to appear in the following parts of the analysis, too. After all, the ground of this thought is so clearly identifiable that it is often used in the very name of this stream of feminism. Quite often in the literature devoted to the analysis of the topic we can find the adjective Catholic added in the midst of the name, thus making it the New Catholic Feminism<sup>6</sup>.

More broadly, we can also locate it within the wider movement of Christian feminism. The problem with this name, however, is that in contemporary times it usually refers to the Protestant feminist theologians, whose theses are mostly not consonant with the New Feminists ones. Nevertheless, if we decide to include the broad Christian influence on various kinds of feminisms, we can then use the term Christian to cover both Protestant and Catholic varieties. In a common social consciousness feminism as such (including the differentiated mainstream kinds of it) is perceived to have been started and continued outside of and in opposition to any religious thought or religious system. Although it is mostly true about the most well-known varieties of feminisms of the second and third wave, it has not been exactly true of the suffragists in many countries of the world. Nevertheless, it is not the topic of this article to uncover their sources, so I will not delve deeper into this, but

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. T. Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory*, Routledge, London and New York 2006.

what is linked with the, let us say, prehistory of the New Feminism, is that way before the modern suffragists appeared on the scene and even before the Enlightenment times Mary Wollstonecraft's book called for the real equality of the sexes<sup>7</sup>, there has already been a religiously motivated feminism previously present on the European scene, which appeared during Renaissance times. Unsurprisingly, it is also now identified as the Christian feminism, though it was quite different from the 20th century movement using this name, but at the same time quite similar to some of the motives present now in the New Feminism. One of the analysts of the New Feminism and the history of various feminisms (and herself a New Feminist), Sr. Prudence Allen claims that the Christian feminism started in 15th century with the writings of Christine de Pizan and the Catholic Renaissance humanism. According to Allen, Christianity in general provided the source of critique of antifeminine convictions and a root for promoting women's education. The later feminisms noted in her writings constituted the following types: Cartesian (evolving into Enlightenment), Marxist, existential-Sartrean, pragmatic or secular-humanistic, and post-modern. So, according to her historical research, John Paul II's New Feminism stems from the tradition of Catholic Renaissance, which came to be later enriched by personalism and phenomenology. As such it is involved in defending the dignity of every person, not only a female person<sup>8</sup>. This article does not provide enough space for the historical arguments on how the Gospel message of liberation from sin influenced the mundane lives of both men and women and how difficult it was for the secular culture as well as the human part of organization of the Church to live fully the message of emancipation. It has just been necessary to mention the broader picture of the non-secular sources going earlier than the pontificate of the pope who inspired the New Feminism. Now it is the time to look more closely to some secular voices inspired by the spiritual source.

## The Secular Meaning

As it was mentioned above, a woman within the New Feminist vision is both equal and different from man. Her special *potential* of giving birth to a new human being is given *in order to* make all humans (both men and women) fully realize the meaning and value of the human person, the value of relations (as constitutive for all kinds of communities and clearly visible in the relation between parents as well as between mother and child), and the meaning of the body (carrying within it the

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<sup>7</sup> M. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 3rd ed., Deidre Shauna Lynch (ed.), W. W. Norton and Company, New York 2009.

<sup>8</sup> P. Allen, R.S.M., „*Mulieris Dignitatem*” *Twenty Years Later: An Overview of the Document and Challenges*, „Ave Maria Law Review”, vol. 8:1, Fall 2009: 13-47, pp. 45-46.

message of a tool for expressing love, relation, and a gift of a self to another self). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese claimed: "As the bearers of life, women, including those who never bear a child, possess a special affinity for connection and, consequently, potentially embody a special gift for connection"<sup>9</sup>. Another New Feminist, Mary Rousseau noted the following: "Women enjoy an incipient psychological closeness to persons, in all situations, that is rooted in our capacity for the physical closeness of pregnancy. The dignity of women, then, is located in our distinctively feminine, spousal, and maternal capacity to foster new life in other persons. With that innate, sensitive maternal insight into their individuality, we often know by a kind of instinct how to nurture their ability to love"<sup>10</sup> (Let us notice how she suggests "a kind of instinct", rather than just "instinct", because this perspective is not based on a raw naturalistic or materialistic view of nature. I will develop this later on in the text.)

M. Rousseau also formed other claims on the basis of messages sent by the human bodies in the acts of making love. She pointed out that "men and women, as the act of making love shows, are not rivals in a power struggle, but partners – complementary partners – in a joint urge for self-abandon that makes them putty in each other's hands. Orgasm is a high point of reciprocal self-giving love. But the self-giving is different for the two spouses, different in ways that are not trivial and that cannot be overlooked. The chief difference is in male initiative and female receptivity. (...) But his initiative is not aggressive and oppressive. (...) And her receptivity is not passive and degrading"<sup>11</sup>. Clearly, our bodily actions can express deep relational meaning freely assumed and adapted by active human agents, according to M. Rousseau.

This last point is particularly interesting because the body, being part of nature, is treated by the New Feminists as meaningful of itself: it is *given* as an instrument for *giving* oneself in return. It is thus understood in a totally opposite way both from the Cartesian dualistic and mechanistic view as well as from the mainstream classical feminist way of treating the female body, which stemmed from Simone de Beauvoir. The existential feminist Simone de Beauvoir claimed that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman<sup>12</sup> and this view became foundational and symbolic for the major lines of feminist thought, thus dividing nature from culture as well as sex from gender. De Beauvoir's diagnosis came from the observation of the immense amount of influence of society on how femininity is lived, while her goal was to free women from being determined by nature to their role of motherhood.

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<sup>9</sup> E. Fox-Genovese, *Equality, Difference, and the Practical Problems of a New Feminism*, in: *Women in Christ. Toward a New Feminism*, Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. 307.

<sup>10</sup> M. Rousseau, *Pope John Paul II's Teaching on Women*, in: *The Catholic Woman*, R. M. McNerny (ed.), Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1990, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>12</sup> S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, transl. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Random House: Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009.

However, the roots of such thinking may be located in the early modern dualism of body and soul/consciousness which was introduced by Descartes (The well-known Platonic dualism of these realities was not yet as radical as the Cartesian view). The modern dualism postulated treating the body as devoid of inner meaning, so the body became just a neutral mechanism waiting to be filled with significance by the human activity. Consequently, also sexuality present in the body came to be perceived as located below the level of person. Sexuality, just like everything of the natural domain, was to be viewed as determined by natural forces, therefore to a large extent limiting the human/personal/conscious domain of freedom. In the name of freedom, it was supposed to get under the total control and arbitrary shaping of the human free decision making. So, the body (with its sexuality) in the process of several centuries between Descartes and the evolving feminism, gained the infamous sense of something which needed to be filled with meaning created by humans (rather than discovered), and in particular it belonged to women to reclaim and define it on their own, rather than let others or nature define what they do with their bodies. Since Descartes, bodies no longer mattered, no longer had meaning inscribed in them by nature (or God), and became open to social and personal definition.

Michael Waldstein, a philosopher dealing with Wojtyła's thought, explains this Cartesian attitude in his *Introduction* to the English translation of *Theology of the Body*: „The scientific rationalism spearheaded by Descartes is above all an attack *on the body*. Its first principle is that the human body, together with all matter, shall be seen as an object of power. Form and final cause must therefore be eliminated from it”<sup>13</sup>. The goal of the body and for that matter the goals of all nature were to be imposed by society. Here was located the foundational point of modernity: the division between nature and culture/society, which later came to be described e.g. by Émile Durkheim in his classic book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*<sup>14</sup>. The modern feminisms, probably in their majority, are based on this very assumption: division of nature and culture is taken there as an unquestioned axiom. The representatives of major feminisms, following the Cartesian and de Beauvoirian line, also view the concept of freedom as being able to take control of the feminine body by the female subject, who from then on becomes ready to join the public sphere on an equal footing with the male subject.

Being aware of this background, we can better see how in a sense counter-modern the New Feminism is: it does not only view the body as meaningless or limiting the freedom of the human subject; it even reclaims the classic, premodern, Aristotelian-Thomistic view on nature as having a very important metaphysical meaning. Yet, on the other hand, it is quite sensitive to the late modern personalistic

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<sup>13</sup> M. Waldstein, *Introduction*, in: John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them. A Theology of the Body*, op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, transl. Karen E. Fields, Free Press, New York 1995.



and phenomenological thinking by stressing the importance of women's conscious decisions to willingly embrace the body as a gift which can only be fruitful, if it is freely controlled and given in the service of others, though within certain natural limits. The New Feminist Marguerite Léna links human bodily nature with the social ethics: "We can only understand and live our sexual identities in the choice that we make to assume and honor them in ourselves and in others as a gift and a call, that is to say, in living in an ethical mode, which is first of all offered to us in the biological mode"<sup>15</sup>. Earlier in the same text Léna makes it clear that the New Feminist view on nature is both the appreciation of what is given and the free response to this gift: "Existence is always already given and already meaningful. But this gift, to be realized, calls for the generosity of another gift; for the meaning to be made clear, the collaboration of other freedoms is called for"<sup>16</sup>.

The New Feminists do not perceive nature, including the female sexuality, as limiting, degrading, or determining in a mechanistic way. Instead, they view the female sexual potential as very valuable (It is also worth mentioning that they do not use this argument in order to devalue the male nature, which is often the case with the more widely known feminists of difference). That is largely because the New Feminists accept this premodern view of nature which was mentioned above and which in late modernity has been embraced and expressed by Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II. His teaching on sexuality was based on the idea that in the human being nothing is strictly *biological*, but rather *personal*. Everything which is natural in humans can and should actually be directed by reason and will towards human fulfilment. However, it does not mean that we can do whatever we want with our natural possibilities and drives. Bodies are neither neutral nor determined totally, especially in their sexual aspect. Their message is to direct us into loving other people (and theologically speaking, God, together with all created nature) on a way of using reason and free will. But this partial and important predetermination of our nature is not treated as limiting us but rather helping us to see what is good and fulfilling. So, it does not determine women or men to necessarily establish families and have children, though this shows that only by a loving attitude towards others both women and men will be happy. And, it also includes indications that although having kids is not a must for all, it is likely to be popular. Moreover, the less people ignore the natural drives, and the more reasonably and respectfully they use the natural forces, the better for them. Hence, we have the comeback of the premodern, pre-dualistic view of nature; the kind of nature which is seen as both meaningful and waiting to be filled with even more meaning by the conscious cooperation with it on the side of the human beings. In this view sexuality needs to be respected in an ecological

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<sup>15</sup> M. Léna, *A Creative Difference: Educating Women*, in: *Women in Christ...*, M. M. Schumacher (ed.), op. cit., p. 317.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 316.

kind of way, though it should not be lived out thoughtlessly or recklessly, but rather with the personalistic effort of proper handling with what is given. In other words, the word "natural" does not mean *naturalistic* but rather adequate for human nature as a person, meaning free and rational being. John Paul II explains it when dealing with the subject of the so-called natural methods of regulating conception, where he warns against biologizing ethics, i.e. „reducing ethics to biology”<sup>17</sup>.

The modern rationalistic divide between ethics and nature produced the late modern bipolarity of the two realities, while the Catholic ethics standing behind the New Feminism brings the two together again. „It is typical of rationalism to make a radical contrast in man between spirit and body, between body and spirit. But man is a person in the unity of his body and his spirit. The body can never be reduced to mere matter: it is a *spiritualized body*, just as man's spirit is so closely united to the body that he can be described as *an embodied spirit*”<sup>18</sup>. Of course the word „man” here refers to the human being in general, so let us now look how this argument pertains to women in the papal document: „Scientific analysis fully confirms that the very physical constitution of women is naturally disposed to motherhood – conception, pregnancy and giving birth – which is a consequence of the marriage union with the man. At the same time, this also corresponds to the psycho-physical structure of women. What the different branches of science have to say on this subject is important and useful, provided that it is not limited to an exclusively bio-physiological interpretation of women and of motherhood. Such a *restricted picture* would go hand in hand with a materialistic concept of the human being and of the world. In such a case, what is truly essential would unfortunately be lost. Motherhood as a *human fact and phenomenon*, is fully explained on the basis of the truth about the person. Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift”<sup>19</sup>. In other words, what we have here is a humanistic understanding of nature: nature indicates certain messages and predisposes us to certain goals but it should never be treated in a materialistic way: neither instincts, nor drives, nor wants are responsible for our overall behaviour. It is the rational beings who are responsible for our activities.

Such a view of nature is not only *not opposed* to culture and society but is rather positioned in accordance with society. It is in fact a view of a very deeply *social nature* and *natural society*. Sexual difference together with its creative potential is presented as showing the social character of human beings and is treated as the very basis of society. In another deep sense of the word, such an outlook is the foundation for the natural law perspective because it is based on the assumption of there being a certain given order of reality which provides us with hints as to good

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<sup>17</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them. A Theology of the Body*, op. cit., 125:2, p. 637.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane*, p. 19.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, p. 18 [emphases in the original text].

and bad choices within the moral world. The natural law is clearly not the law of nature or biology. It does not have an environmental character. It pertains to the person, who is able to uncover the moral value in a given reality as well as respond with a rational activity of choosing what is good and fulfilling the potential provided there. As we can see, the secular message or long-term consequence of the New Feminist assumptions is not only connected with strengthening the values of femininity (especially connected with motherhood) but also tearing down the dualistic vision of the human being and breaking the division between nature and culture. This break surely spells doom for the radical separation of sex and gender.

## Sex and Gender Reconciliation

In the case of New Feminism, we deal with a certain revitalization of the spiritual understanding of the body. After a few centuries of secular treatment of the body as a neutral mechanism, we observe here the exact turn to such interpretations according to which the sexually differentiated body is the instrument for creating the visible human icon of God-Love. Thus, with the possibilities hidden in the body various bridges are built: between the divine and the human, between the spiritual and the material, between woman and man, and finally between nature and society. This last bridge takes us to the assumed link between sex and gender. The so-called biological sex is never understood as the raw biology in this perspective (To be exact, biology is seen as a humanly created scientific way of systematizing nature, so we should rather say "natural sex" rather than "biological sex" in the first place). Nature, and especially sexuality, has a meaning vital from the personal and social point of view. The analysts of the theology of the body formulate the following argument: „The body is a great liberator that frees us from the isolation of the lonely ego that is (at most) certain only of its own existence.“ Later on the same page: „The body is man's openness to the world“<sup>20</sup>. In other words, the body with its sexual differentiation allows us to be ecstatic, i.e. to go beyond ourselves and reach out to others even in total self-giving. Of course woman is also included in the category of man used in citations above, especially since she is the one thanks to whose existence the loving relation becomes clearly visible and possible in the most integrated sense: both physical and spiritual possible in the sexual act. Michele M. Schumacher summarizes the gist of the message acknowledged by thinkers identifying themselves with the theology of the body and the New Feminism, when she writes about femininity and masculinity: „Each manifests to the sexually differentiated other the »ecstatic« nature of human existence, the vocation to realize oneself by becoming

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<sup>20</sup> C. Anderson, J. Granados, *Called to Love. Approaching John Paul II's Theology of the Body*, Doubleday, New York 2009, p. 32.

a gift for the other"<sup>21</sup>. Needless to say, ecstasy is not limited here merely to the erotic meaning but the erotic is rather seen as part of the broader, relational and social paradigm. So, the natural sexual difference is seen as a sign of the social *par excellence*.

However, there still is a need for the recognition of the two aspects of femininity and masculinity, namely the natural sex and the social gender. Likewise, there is also a theoretical variety of ways presenting the relations between sexes and genders. Sr. Prudence Allen enumerates the following types of theories concerning man-woman relations: gender unity (unisex), traditional gender polarity (man superior to woman), reverse gender polarity (woman superior to man), fractional gender complementarity (both complementary as parts of a whole rather than on their own), integral gender polarity (equal and complementary as wholes), and finally, gender neutrality<sup>22</sup>. She identifies the integral gender polarity as the one present in the New Feminism, where men and women are presented as equal and complementary, though not partial in their individuality. So, complementarity in certain aspects does not deprive persons of their integral wholeness in this view. Neither does it deprive women or men of their dignity by defining their nature too narrowly by stressing solely their differences pushed to the maximum. Beatriz Vollmer Coles claims that such a degradation was the case with the mainstream of the feminist movement: „The great failure of twentieth-century feminism has been its careless manipulation of concepts and its disregard of human dignity. One extreme overemphasized the physical differences, thus reducing womanhood to the mere capacity of childbearing, while the other stressed the social influence on gendered behaviour, leaving the differentiation between male and female to the malleability of the mind. Both groups neglected the metaphysical and transcendental aspect of human existence"<sup>23</sup>. Let us notice that Vollmer Coles, standing on the New Feminist side, argues against both poles of stressing either the strictly physical interpretation of sex or the exclusively cultural interpretation of gender. She appeals for restoring the link between these realities: „I believe the key to a new and more enriching feminism for this new millennium lies in the reunion of sex and gender"<sup>24</sup>.

To me it seems as the key way of conceptualizing the message proposed by New Feminism on the present market of the feminist ideas. Banal as it may seem on the face of it, it is actually, in my opinion, not banal at all. Differentiating the two realities and yet claiming that they need to be connected in order to be viable and productive, may be a more attractive perspective than the alternatives which

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<sup>21</sup> M. M. Schumacher, *The Unity of the Two: Toward a New Feminist Sacramentality of the Body*, in: *Women in Christ...*, M. M. Schumacher (ed.), op. cit., pp. 229-230.

<sup>22</sup> P. Allen, R.S.M., *Man-Woman Complementarity: The Catholic Inspiration*, „Logos”, vol. 9, no. 3, Summer 2006: 87-108, pp. 87-88.

<sup>23</sup> B. Vollmer Coles, *New Feminism: A Sex-Gender Reunion*, in: *Women in Christ...*, M. M. Schumacher (ed.), op. cit., 2004, pp. 62-63.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

oppose sex and gender. Sooner or later the radical opposition produces the vision which prefers one side or the other and thus seems to ignore some important aspects of reality.

Moreover, the basis for the proposed reunion of sex and gender is not just pragmatic but rather located at a point ignored by both sides of the quarrel, namely the metaphysical aspect of humanity. Vollmer Coles suggests looking for the essence of the feminine „in the transcendent area of human embodiment: in the gendered spirit of woman”<sup>25</sup> rather than in the body. She uses the classical philosophical categories of matter and form/substance in order to explain her way of understanding the relation between sex and gender. She suggests superimposing „sex on the tangible, material, bodily side of the human composite and *gender* on that of transcendence, form, and soul”<sup>26</sup>. Since there is no matter without form, there is no sex without gender, which gives a particular individual form of either masculine or feminine to the material sex of the person. Thus, she perceives sex and gender as necessarily interdependent in the lives of particular individual persons<sup>27</sup>. It is important to notice that her understanding of gender is going beyond the social definition of gender roles and towards the subjective level of human personality, which necessarily includes the social influences. What is more, she presents both aspects as attractively dynamic: „superimposing gender upon the soul (form) and sex upon the body (matter), we see that neither the one nor the other can ever be considered static; instead we can only grow toward our own fulfillment or perfection by the very fact of having a transcendent dimension to our embodied (material) existence. (...) We must acknowledge that both the soul and gender are influenced by grace, culture, family, individual experience, and much more; so, they are both at least partially »constructed« rather than inborn”<sup>28</sup>. Let us finally notice that she does not just let society be an important factor for construction of gender but puts grace as the first factor in row, thus proving her post-secularist standpoint.

This position on sex and gender is emblematic of New Feminism and as such can be juxtaposed with the sociological concept proposed by Florian Znaniecki of the „humanistic coefficient”<sup>29</sup>. According to Znaniecki cultural objects are given in human experience. In other words, cultural objects (values) are correlates of the subject. They have both the empirical content (like natural objects) and the cultural meaning (depending on the society). The New Feminist attitude presented above clearly uncovers the potentially meaningful contents inscribed already in nature, such as the message of the social nature of humans visible in our sexuality, which nevertheless, needs our conscious response and cultural defining, too. Gender roles do build upon

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 63-64.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> F. Znaniecki, *The Method of Sociology*, Farrar and Rinehart, New York 1934, pp. 36-43.

nature in the New Feminist perspective, while nature with its sexuality is already a value, though different from the concept of values described by Florian Znaniecki, because it seems to be richer, broader, and philosophically realist, if by realism we mean the classical position of the pre-existence of a certain order independent from human/social will. Michele M. Schumacher writes about the realist position in terms of treating sexuality as given, yet to be actively accepted freely and used later for self-determination within certain natural limits. She in a sense argues for a peaceful reconciliation of nature and freedom: „To admit to this realist position (...) is hardly to reduce woman to a purely material being. Nor is it to take from her the freedom of self-determination (as distinct from self-creation) or to remove her from the awesome world of mystery and the creative world of art. Nor, still, is it to separate her from the loving and providential regard of her Creator. Rather, it means grounding, and thus safeguarding, her freedom in her God-given human nature, such that she is free with a freedom destined for what is good and true and noble, a freedom that is realized in self-gift, because the person is realized in communion”<sup>30</sup>. Rather than enslavement or determination, we receive the liberation from arbitrariness of others, including the general society and even our own individual license. The objective and independent order of human nature as a good in itself is there presented as the safeguard against the possible chaos of radical relativism and as a material ready to be used for unlimited creativity of rational subjects of both sexes.

### The Long-term Reflections

This realist position taken by the New Feminists makes it necessary to come back to Descartes mentioned above and we actually need even to go deeper in history of ideas. The Cartesian mechanistic neutrality of nature, opposed to the philosophical realism of Aristotle and Aquinas, who saw nature of created world as good in itself, in fact stemmed from the revolutionarily turn taken by William of Ockham in 14th century. According to Servais Pinckaers<sup>31</sup> it was Ockham who theoretically deprived nature of immanent goodness and meaning in order to save the sovereignty of God. In the name of freedom, nature could not determine God and later could not restrict the human being. Free choice had to be really free of any influence of natural tendencies. Nature became perceived as imposed, while freedom evolved to connote radical, self-creative autonomy. Hence came the divorce

<sup>30</sup> M. M. Schumacher, *A Woman in Stone or in the Heart of Man? Navigating between Naturalism and Idealism in the Spirit of "Veritatis Splendor"*, "Nova et Vetera", English Edition, vol. 11, no. 4 (2013): 1249-86, p. 1271.

<sup>31</sup> S. T. Pinckaers O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, (transl. by M. T. Noble), Washington, D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1995; *Morality. The Catholic View*, Preface by Alasdair MacIntyre, transl. by Michael Sherwin, O.P., St. Augustine's Press, South Bend, IN, 2003.

between nature and culture/freedom or, analogically, divorce between sex and gender. Actually, this divorce was in the long run responsible for the modern alienation from nature and from sexuality.

What is more, it may also have contributed to the historically developing alienation from femininity, as is claimed by another New Feminist, namely Pia Francesca de Solenni, and a male representative of New Feminism, Fr. Francis Martin. He follows the analysis of W. Norris Clark and argues that the modern antifeminism is largely rooted in the Ockhamian exclusion of the relational and receptive vision of the human subject, while receptivity and relationality were naturally more connected with the feminine aspect of the human nature<sup>32</sup>. Criticism towards receptivity and the sole appraisal of creativity put men in a privileged position and introduced the one-sided identification of receptivity with women rather than with femininity, which is also partly present in men. This led to slow but effective depreciation of the role of women and femininity, deprived women of respect and later deprived them of their rights<sup>33</sup>. Pia Francesca de Solenni claims that the early modernity pushed women to the depreciated private sphere because of the skewed understanding of the *human mind* as solely creative<sup>34</sup>.

So, the New Feminism uncovers the forgotten and underappreciated receptivity as presented more clearly, though not exclusively, by women, who in modernity were unjustly pushed aside to the downgraded positions. The New Feminists such as de Solenni show that there is a grave need for establishing a renewed harmony between receptivity and creativity, without at the same time associating one or the other exclusively with a single sex or gender. They suggest that the postulated reconciliation between these aspects of reality requires a certain basic attitude of trust in the goodness of nature. I would say, it requires a certain ecological standpoint fully respectful towards the given reality, which is supposed to be rich in gifts ready to be freely developed rather than hostile to human freedom and activity. So, just as the early modern social alienation from nature (and its vision as a value), including the alienation from the body and sexuality, resulted in the cultural alienation of women and femininity, the late modern post-secular New Feminists call for the overcoming of this alienation by the reconciliation of men and women as well as the reconciliation of sex and gender as exemplary for the end of the conflict between nature and culture.

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<sup>32</sup> F. Martin, *The Feminist Question. Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition*, Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, s. 143.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, s. 197.

<sup>34</sup> P. F. de Solenni, *A Hermeneutic of Aquinas's Mens Through a Sexually Differentiated Epistemology. Towards and Understanding of Woman as Imago Dei*, Pontificia Universitas Sanctae Crucis, Romae 2000.

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