

## REVIEW ESSAY

*The Concept of Woman*. Volume 3, *The Search for Communion of Persons, 1500–2015*. By Sister Prudence Allen, RSM. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016. xxvii + 546 pages. \$55.00 (paper).

Sr. Prudence Allen's extensive work on the concept of woman finds its culmination in this massive book, the third in a trilogy that began with a first volume on the Aristotelian revolution (up to 1250) and a second that traced developments from 1250 to 1500. In this exhaustively and meticulously researched book, Allen argues for an "integral complementarity" between man and woman that she argues is "proven" through its ability to cohere with John Henry Newman's criteria for doctrinal development, set out in his *Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (10–11). Through a detailed survey of both men and women thinkers since 1500, including some of the most prominent—Leonardo da Vinci, René Descartes, Immanuel Kant—as well as some lesser known—Elena Tarabotti and Moderata Fonte—Allen argues that only a conception of complementarity based in a revised Aristotelian hylomorphism can adequately account for what it means to be a woman as well as be in accord with Roman Catholic teaching.

The book has seven dense and lengthy chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion, that trace various conceptions of woman since 1500. The first, "Engendered Identities in Religious Events and Authors," begins by showing how the *tilma* (cloak) of Mary of Guadalupe and the Shroud of Turin provide "modern images of a ('perfect') woman and of a ('true') man that are both countercultural" (42). Allen maintains that these images are not of human origin, and stand as models for women and men now as much as then. The chapter also includes an argument for the superiority of the Roman Catholic theology of marriage by noting how Protestant Reformers demanded woman's obedience in the marriage ceremony while the Catholic tradition was innovative in requiring mutual consent. This is accompanied by a chart of marriage rites that required woman's obedience, which is one of over thirty charts and tables in the book summarizing various positions under discussion. The chapter also includes a review of Thomas More and his family, particularly his wife and daughter, and lengthy discussions of Catherine of Genoa, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross. In her section on Teresa, Allen describes Teresa's use of the nuptial metaphor in *The Interior Castle* and concludes that "spiritual marriage is, therefore, a revelation of

faith rather than of the senses and reason” because of its presence in both testaments (90). Allen also makes the rather extraordinary statement that “the Reformation led to a wide-ranging dulling and even crushing of conscience in vast numbers of women and men of Europe” (58). She makes further critical comments on the violence perpetrated by Protestants against Catholics without any comment on Catholic violence against Protestants.

The following chapters cover ideas of women’s identity in academic and humanist texts (chapter 2), gender identity and the Copernican revolution (chapter 3), the Cartesian revolution (chapter 4), post-Cartesian thought (chapter 5), and a chapter on twentieth-century thinkers (chapter 6), before culminating in chapter 7, which treats Pope John Paul II as the “founder of integral gender complementarity.” Throughout this extraordinarily detailed and comprehensive survey, Allen includes copious references to thinkers’ ideas as well as their personal lives, including how someone like René Descartes has been unfairly described as anti-woman despite his relationships with and his “warm and encouraging attitude toward women” (333). Throughout the book, the term “fractional complementarity,” initially defined in the introduction as the idea that men and women together “add up to one single person” is contrasted with “integral complementarity,” which means “together [men and women] synergetically generate something or someone more” (8).

This reviewer counted 119 authors on the concept of woman discussed by Allen, listed at the beginning of the book. Some are covered very briefly, but most receive a thoughtful and detailed treatment. The research that went into this book is staggering; the book is a valuable resource for many ideas about womanhood throughout this period, as well as the lives that these men and women lived. It effectively puts to rest any argument that women were not actively engaged in philosophical argumentation throughout this time. Allen connects theories of gender to developments in the sciences, such as the “discovery” of the female ovum, and to cosmology, as in the third chapter, which covers medical and scientific pioneers, including Galileo. This provides Allen a way of showing that the philosophical and theological foundations for integral gender complementarity can also be linked to developments in the sciences. The development of integral complementarity, however, was interrupted with Descartes’ rejection of hylomorphism, and further accelerated the growth of factional complementarity in such thinkers as Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and others (chapter 5).

Allen’s main concern in the modern period is “gender ideology,” an idea that she claims defines “a category of authors who make direct arguments that distinctions between male and female or woman and man should be destroyed” (9). In chapter 6, she discusses the work of contemporary feminist

thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Bordo, and Mary Daly, along with other twentieth-century writers, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung, arguing that they all advocate various forms of “sex polarity” (390), contrary to her argument for complementarity between the sexes. As does official Catholic teaching, she ultimately rejects the distinction between sex as biological and gender as a sociocultural construction. In chapter 6 she refers to “gender ideology” as a “virus,” and describes the efforts of Mary Ann Glendon and others in “mapping and attacking” this virus (413).

Allen’s adulatory chapter on John Paul II reviews his life story, including his friendships with women. It also describes the influences on his thinking by colleagues such as Sister Zofia Zdybicka, who was a student of his and whom he later appointed to the Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas, to Edith Stein, whose work he learned about through a friend of Stein’s and which offered ideas similar to his. The chapter provides a very helpful and informative intellectual biography of the late pope and the development of his thought on gender complementarity, including the ideas that led to his influence on the position taken by Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*. At the end of the chapter, Allen returns to her focus on the *tilma* of Mary of Guadalupe and the Shroud of Turin to argue that at the end of time, “there we hope to see the crucified man and the pregnant woman” (483). Ultimately, she argues, the full communion of humanity is found in the mutual self-giving of man and woman to each other. In a chart at the end of this chapter summarizing the views of John Paul II, Allen describes the ultimate example of the concept of woman as found in the woman religious consecrated to chastity and the corresponding man as the sacramental priest’s complete self-gift of himself to the church, his bride (483–84).

Allen’s conclusion summarizes Newman’s seven criteria, showing how each is fulfilled in the conception of gender complementarity that she has described throughout the book. In addition, she argues that one can find in contemporary science a confirmation of complementarity by turning to quantum theory: “To understand light, one needs to understand how it is measured both as a particle and as a wave; similarly, to understand the human being, one needs to understand how the two ways of being a human being are both as a woman and as a man individually and together” (498). She concludes her reflections by describing the present volume as a “Carmelite age,” as the first volume portrayed a Benedictine age and the second a Dominican age.

This book is exhaustively researched and clearly written. It pays careful attention to detail, offering numerous references to primary sources. It is a

font of information about famous as well as obscure writers on the nature of women. Yet there is also much that is missing in this book. There appear to be no references to any conception of sex that is nonbinary, no discussion of the development of conceptions of sexuality, save for a highly critical but brief review of Foucault that fails to do justice to the complexity of his thought (405–6). There is no mention of any number of feminist thinkers of the twentieth century who challenged prevailing conceptions of womanhood, such as Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*. Judith Butler receives not so much as a footnote. Whether or not one agrees with Butler's challenge to conceptions of sex and personhood, her ideas are important to consider, given their influence in postmodern thought. Nor is there mention of any recent scientific research on sex and gender differences, which challenges the clear binary understanding that Allen maintains.

But what is most astonishing and perplexing to this reviewer is the complete and utter absence of any mention at all of contemporary Catholic or Protestant feminist theologians. One would think that in such a massive study encompassing the Western "concept of woman" for the last 500 years that there would be some recognition, even if critical, of the work of such thinkers as Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Margaret Farley, Lisa Sowle Cahill, and Cristina Traina, all of whom have written extensively on theological anthropology. Allen does discuss the work of Mary Daly, but dismisses her quickly for what Allen calls Daly's radical theories of sex-polarity. While all of the feminist theologians mentioned above reject the idea of a "feminine genius" as it emerges in John Paul's and Stein's theories of gender complementarity, and which Allen supports, Cahill, Farley, and Traina have a highly nuanced sense of the distinctions between men and women based on revised understandings of natural law. Their contributions to theological anthropology have raised important questions about the role of nature and culture. While Ruether rejects altogether any understanding of differences between men and women that are other than "reproductive role specialization," Cahill and Traina take a more complex view of human sexuality that is sensitive to both biological and sociocultural differences. Farley's work on sexuality also takes into account the experiences of women outside of Western and European contexts. And it is not only the work of feminist theologians that Allen ignores but the work of many recent feminist philosophers as well, who deal with issues relating to selfhood, motherhood, dependent care, and so on. It is as if these figures and issues did not exist. Their absence is striking.

This book, along with the preceding two volumes, will be a valuable resource for those seeking support for arguments for complementarity both historically and in the present. The vast resources that Allen brings to bear

on her argument are impressive indeed. Yet this book's failure to deal seriously with feminist thought as well as the more complex history of Catholic teaching on women—for example, papal statements on women's inferiority as found as recently as the 1930s in *Casti Connubii* and the shameful treatment of women religious such as Mary Ward, to name just two examples—reveals the book's limited scope, despite its massive size. Those seeking a comprehensive treatment of theories of women throughout the Western tradition will find much valuable information, but it is all filtered through a perspective that lacks historical complexity and nuance, that ignores an entire body of recent scholarship, and that is ultimately designed to support a theory of essentialist gender complementarity that undergirds ideas of women's maternal "feminine genius."

SUSAN A. ROSS

*Loyola University Chicago*