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Aaron Raverty OSB

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [obsculta@csbsju.edu](mailto:obsculta@csbsju.edu)*

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## The Monastic Ideal and the Glorified/ Spiritual Resurrection Body: An Exercise in Speculative Theology

Aaron Raverty, OSB

Christianity leaves much to the imagination. Doctrines and dogma provide the grounding and outline the contours of our faith, but they also suggest many questions that go unanswered. Retreat masters like Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* encourage us to engage our imaginations—especially our senses—to fill in the gaps during meditation on the Scripture narratives. We all wonder about some aspects of the deposit of faith passed on to us. Can speculation really enhance our Christian faith commitment?

I must admit that I sometimes ruminate about the spiritual body—you know, the glorified body connected to the resurrection. St. Paul speaks to us about “earthly [physical] bodies” and “heavenly bodies,” but beyond emphasis he says precious little about the distinctions (see 1 Cor 15:35-50). My ruminations have led me in some interesting directions. Allow me to provide one example: *Can the consecrated bodies of*

*vowed monastics foreshadow the glorified bodies we will inherit someday as a consequence of our common baptism in Christ?* More specifically, do the chaste celibacy promised by monastics and associated ascetical practices adumbrate a newly *gendered* life in our Christian spiritual bodies?<sup>1</sup> Questions like these lead us into the realm of speculative theology.

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<sup>1</sup> “Since most early Christian writers viewed sexual differentiation as part of the fallen state, to become a perfect man meant to transcend differentiation altogether. The metaphors of a woman turned into man and the manly woman do not so much signify gender crossing as the intention to push beyond the categories of gender themselves” (Karen Jo Torjesen, “Martyrs, Ascetics, and Gnostics: Gender-Crossing in Early Christianity,” in *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet, 79–91 [London and New York: Routledge, 1996], 89).

The development of speculative theology is closely tied to philosophy. It is concerned with the more abstract ontological questions, more at odds with the phenomenological world. It absorbs the essence of world culture and considers theological questions from a metaphysical standpoint. . . . Although this type of theology is not of immediate benefit to the church, because it is in contact and dialogue with the latest and most advanced thinking, it guarantees that theology will be up-to-date. In addition, speculative theology ensures that our theology has a profound grounding; it is the intellectual storehouse of the church's theology.<sup>2</sup>

This paper is an exercise in speculative theology. Although yanked out of its scriptural context, please indulge my theological meanderings in this essay as I echo St. Paul's request in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me!" (2 Cor 11:1 NRSV).

The nature of the glorified, spiritual body that human beings will take on (according to Christian tradition) in their postresurrection existence remains a fascinating mystery. The meager biblical data suggest that our biological integrity will be maintained insofar as we will still be recognizable in terms of our previous earthly identity, but that we will also be changed. Jesus himself was mysteriously transformed after his resurrection, and he was not always immediately recognizable even to his closest followers (John 20:14; 21:4; Luke 24:16, 37). Can we speculate about the ultimate nature of our glorified, spiritual, postresurrection bodies by extrapolating from our current human biological condition? I believe we can gain some insight into our postresurrection bodies by examining the gendered agency of the monastic life.

Caroline Bynum sets the stage for our investigation by her comment that "heaven was far from earth, and the resurrected body, albeit a locus of particularity, of what makes us ourselves, did not need to be fully like the body we have

here."<sup>3</sup> By virtue of their baptism, of course, all Christians have undergone the deconstruction of death along with Christ, only to be reconstructed with him by a type of rebirth: "Once we are baptized, we are united with Christ in his death and in his resurrection (Rom 6:3-4; Col 2:12). We still await the future resurrection, when we shall be perfectly conformed to his glorified body, and shall bear the image of the heavenly Adam, the resurrected Jesus, after having borne the image of the earthly Adam (1 Cor 15:45-49)."<sup>4</sup> The monastic life, commonly considered an intensification of baptism, also takes on a deeper ascetic commitment: "Asceticism, to Tertullian, prepares us for glory by moving our flesh away from mutability and toward the incorruptibility and impassibility of heaven."<sup>5</sup> Monastics commit themselves to chaste celibacy. Thus, they do not exercise their right to procreate, which they relinquish in the form of a vow. They do retain their reproductive anatomy and potential, however, and in so doing, they anticipate the postresurrection body: According to Tertullian, "[genitals] will have no function in the resurrection, but they will survive for the sake of beauty."<sup>6</sup> The im-

plication here is that sexual organs, although still part of the resurrection body, have transcended their former procreative function on a par with the vowed monastic life.<sup>7</sup>

It is noteworthy that early Christian commentators provided little reflection on the gendered nature of the resurrection body. "With the partial exception of Jerome . . .

the most materialistic of fourth- and fifth-century writers on bodily resurrection do not focus on maintaining distinctions owing to gender . . ."<sup>8</sup> On the face of it, why should eschatological gender distinctions of masculinity and femininity divide monastic agents at all?

Can it be that *asceticism*, voluntarily embraced by the aspiring male or female embarking upon monastic life through ini-

<sup>3</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity: 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 72.

<sup>4</sup> Luis Ladaria, F., "Christian Faith in God," in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, ed. Karl Josef Becker and Ilaria Morali, 153–78, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2010), 177.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>7</sup> The fourth-century Syriac writer "Aphrahat discards procreation and (possibly) sexual difference in heaven . . ." (Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 75).

<sup>8</sup> Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 111.

*The nature of the glorified, spiritual body that human beings will take on (according to Christian tradition) in their postresurrection existence remains a fascinating mystery.*

<sup>2</sup> Xan Xiyu, "What Is Theology?—with a Reflection on the Theology of K. H. Ting," *Chinese Theological Review* 15, n.d. (<http://www.amitynewsservice.org/page.php?page=1219><http://www.amitynewsservice.org/page.php?page=1219>; accessed 12 December 2011).

tiation in the rite of monastic profession, provides the basis for gender-variant reassignment? While perhaps most evident in the appropriation of celibate chastity, this proposed gender status is undergirded by a scaffolding of related ascetical practices. Here let us deepen our investigation into this new form of gendered agency by an examination of the glorified or spiritual body that Jesus Christ assumed after his resurrection from the dead and that we human beings will likewise assume in the Final Resurrection.<sup>9</sup>

### Protology and Eschatology

*Protology* is a term derived from Greek, meaning a study of the “first things.” Thus, protology is the study of creation, including human creation and the first Adam. If we consider the Hebrew origins of the title “Adam,” we discover that it can also be collectively rendered as the “first humanity.”<sup>10</sup> As the primal parents of humankind, God bestowed upon Adam (and the earliest humanity he represents) and Eve a special set of *preternatural gifts*.<sup>11</sup> These preternatural gifts were those of *immortality* (the inability of the body to decay or disintegrate); *impassibility* (the inability of the body to suffer in any way or to die); *freedom from concupiscence* (the body’s propensity or inclination to sin); *freedom from sin*; and *infused knowledge* (direct understanding of God unmediated by our human senses). Due to the Fall, Adam (and the first humanity) and Eve lost these original gifts from God. But we humans will be given back these same gifts in our glorified/spiritual bodies in the Final Resurrection due to the atonement won for us through Jesus Christ as the second Adam, when we will be reunited with, and enjoy, the beatific vision of God in heaven:

Christ and the investiture of glorious bodies upon the righteous is explained by the idea that Adam’s lost glory is reserved for the righteous, in the form of a heavenly body. The pattern is clear—Adam’s glorious body was stripped from him thus leaving

<sup>9</sup> “Ascetics’ mastery over basic needs of nutrition and procreation made their bodies symbols in this life (sacraments, we could now say) of the pure, unchanging, eternal state of the glorified bodies that Augustine would teach is the beatitude of those judged worthy of the resurrection of the dead” (Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Healing and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), n.p.

<sup>10</sup> “The use of the Hebrew word with the definite article Ha-Adam, ‘the Adam,’ seems to suggest, as the NRSV translation has it, ‘humankind.’ This translation means that God is creating, not a man who is androgynous, but the basic qualities of ‘humankind.’” ([http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume4/number2/ssr04\\_02\\_e01.html](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/journals/ssr/issues/volume4/number2/ssr04_02_e01.html); accessed 22 March 2007).

<sup>11</sup> “[E]unuchs, because of their special gender status, were associated with preternatural realms” (Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* [Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003], 83).

him with a body of flesh; the believer’s earthly body will be stripped from him and replaced with a glorious body.<sup>12</sup>

*Eschatology*, another Greek term, means the study of the “final things.” Eschatology comes on the other end of the continuum from the origin of all things in protology, and it completes and recapitulates in a kind of grand circle what was initiated “in the beginning.” In the Christian New Testament, eschatology has been described as either *proleptic* or *realized*. Proleptic eschatology anticipates what awaits humanity in the “final times”; it often signals the future coming of the kingdom of God, and it may point either to the hoped-for reward of heaven or to the punishment of hell. Realized eschatology, on the other hand, folds future anticipation back into humanity’s present, in such a way that the kingdom of God is already among us, here and now, in our very midst. Thus, protology and eschatology reflect and complement one another, connecting the first Adam with the second Adam in the mystery of human salvation. In terms of our earlier discussion, the current monastic body is a *relic* that foreshadows the postresurrection body in the end-time: “[E]arly fifth-century eschatology set the course of discussion for hundreds of years. . . . [In the twelfth century] the paradigmatic body was the body of the saint, purified in life by denying those natural processes (especially nutrition and procreation) that threaten stability and glorified in death by becoming a jewel-like relic.”<sup>13</sup>

### Adam as Type of the Monastic

The Bible portrays Adam and Eve as the first human beings. But is there a sense in which they may also be considered the original *monastic* prototype? The *Liber Graduum*, or *Book of Steps*, gives them this status. If we think of monastics, because of their religious consecration, as somehow mediating between the Divine and humanity, this is a serious consideration: “[I]t is clear that Adam and Eve are not on the same level as their creator, yet it is equally clear that they are not quite the same as those who follow and eventually populate the earth. There is an obvious and understandable awareness that Adam stands between God and humanity.”<sup>14</sup>

As “mediator,” this first Adam both imitates and foreshadows the second Adam, Jesus Christ, “mediator between God and humankind” (1 Timothy 2:5 NRSV). If we consider the broader sweep of religious functionaries in various cultures, such a position also describes the shaman who me-

<sup>12</sup> C. Marvin Pate, *The Glory of Adam and the Afflictions of the Righteous: Pauline Suffering in Context* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993), 122.

<sup>13</sup> Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 113–14.

<sup>14</sup> Dexter E. Callender, *Adam in Myth and History: Ancient Israelite Perspectives on the Primal Human*, Harvard Semitic Studies 48 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 32.

diates between human beings and the spirit world. Insofar as Benedictine monastics are imitators of Jesus Christ, they model both the first and second Adam as well as exhibiting mediation in their special role as intercessors of prayer between humanity and God.

Scripture announces that “God fashioned the earth creature (*ḥā’ādām*) from the soil (*ḥā’ādāmâ*, v. 7).”<sup>15</sup>

In the first chapter of Genesis we are told that man was created; man understood as a human being, not as a male, was created male and female. Some of the Fathers, following this logic of the image and the likeness, speak of the fact that man, that is, the human being created in the first place, was neither male nor female in the full sense in which we understand these words now, but was a being of still indeterminate sex, a human being containing within himself all the possibilities of male and female being [read *gender*]. They were not in conflict, not developed so that they were side by side, but as we see them in an embryo or in the very early stages of development of a child, so that within the same being there was this bipolarity, complementary and not in opposition with one another.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in line with Adam’s creation and the gender-variant status of the monastic, as it is here proposed, we may consider Adam as the original and primordial source of gender differentiation:

In the Israelite tradition the original earth creature appears to have been both asexual and ungendered; however, one might argue that in an inchoate, potential form both feminine and masculine characteristics were present in the original earth creature and became explicit with the creation of the first couple in Gen 2:7, 21–24. Thereafter, the relation between male and female, feminine and masculine is shaped according to the heterosexual model of Genesis 1–2 where the goal of male and female relationship is to reestablish a unity (Gen 1:26–28; 2:24) [in the marital state] by way of heterosexual union and procreation.<sup>17</sup>

Adam was created as an undifferentiated unity.<sup>18</sup> His solitary

<sup>15</sup> Dale Launderville, *Celibacy in the Ancient World: Its Ideal and Practice in Pre-Hellenistic Israel, Mesopotamia, and Greece* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 311–12.

<sup>16</sup> Gillian Crow, ed., *Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh: Essential Writings*, Modern Spiritual Masters Series (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2010), 86.

<sup>17</sup> Launderville, *Celibacy in the Ancient World*, 370–71.

<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to compare this statement with the early teachings of Buddhism: “[S]exual difference is the product of some

state reminds us that, like the origin of the root term for the monastic (Gr. *mónos*, *mónachos*), he is *alone*. His designation as masculine seems more limited to grammatical rather than to biological gender:

The earth creature God had formed was alone. In the creation story in Gen 2:4b–25 the earth creature is grammatically treated as masculine in gender (through masculine singular pronouns and suffixes), but this seems to be primarily a consequence of the structure of the Hebrew language, which necessarily categorizes persons and objects as masculine or feminine. . . . [T]he gender and sex of the earth creature do not yet exist.<sup>19</sup>

The first Adam came from the earth, was made in the image and likeness of God, and possessed preternatural gifts. The second Adam, Jesus Christ, was “a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45) and is, according to the spiritual master Columbia Marion, the “ideal of the monk.” To be sure, Jesus was of the male sex in his humanity, but can we consider his gender as unequivocally *masculine*?

Looking honestly at our ancient tradition, it is clear that the mystery of Christ cannot be described in masculine terms alone. Because of historical and cultural circumstances, the Second Person of the Trinity became a male human being. Before the Incarnation, however, that person was described as “she.” As the Incarnation continues to unfold after Christ’s resurrection and ascension, it is again the feminine Sophia who expresses the mystery—as pointed out by the Russian theologian Soloviev.<sup>20</sup>

Thus we can trace the link from the undifferentiated primordial earth creature (the first Adam) through the incarnated (sexually male, but gender-variant) Jesus Christ (the second Adam), to the *monastic*. Such a trail of logic not only provides an opportunity for considering the variant character of the *monastic gender status*, but also reinforces the train of thought about our glorified resurrection bodies as retaining the anatomical but not the procreational potentials of our current, biological human bodies. In this reckoning, because of their commitment to chaste celibacy, monastics carry about in

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kind of fall of humankind, and it is supposed to disappear as one proceeds toward spiritual realization. According to this model, women gradually become equal to men (or even, become men), as they reach higher stages. This ideal is expressed in the *Therīgāthā*, where women are said to have become arhats” (Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* [New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003], 61).

<sup>19</sup> Launderville, *Celibacy in the Ancient World*, 312–13.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Lentz, and Edwina Gately, *Christ in the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 113.

their human bodies the prefiguration of the glorified resurrection body in its lack of procreational fulfillment. Male and female human beings who give themselves to each other in marriage and express their procreational potentials in parenting children also mirror the image and likeness of God, but in a way different from the monastic:

[I]f one argues that the procreative potential of male and female is present in God, this presence takes the form of an archetype in which there is no sexual coupling; the reason for mentioning this sexual differentiation in God would

be to affirm the necessity and value of this sexual differentiation for the subsequent process of human procreation. According to this line of argument the simultaneous existence of male and female within the Godhead takes the form of an archetype rather than of physical shape and activity.<sup>21</sup>

It is noteworthy in this context that the Buddhist tradition also heralds “gender transcendence” in a central deity moving from the Indian to the Chinese pantheon: “Many Buddhists believed that Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is beyond gender.”<sup>22</sup> Others describe this discrepancy as a “gender shift”:

Avalokitesvara is the Bodhisattva of the beautiful *Lotus Sutra*. Originally a male deity of Indian Buddhism, he rose to become the most popular savior in Chinese Buddhism, in the process changing sex and significance. . . . Avalokitesvara translates into Chinese as Guanyin. . . . Guanyin is the only female in the Buddhist cosmology of China.<sup>23</sup>

By virtue of their public profession and religious consecration, as the argument is presented here, monastics acquire a new gender status. Some, like Peter Brown, prefer to think of monastics as stripped of gender altogether:

If the life of a monk was thought to foreshadow the

<sup>21</sup> Launderville, *Celibacy in the Ancient World*, 317–18.

<sup>22</sup> Joan Halifax, *The Fruitful Darkness: Reconnecting with the Body of the Earth* (San Francisco CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 197.

<sup>23</sup> Martin Palmer, and others, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (New York: Ballantine Wellspring, 2001), 241–43.

*Because of their commitment  
to chaste celibacy, monastics carry about  
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of the glorified resurrection body  
in its lack of procreational fulfillment.*

paradisiacal state of an asexual human nature, then man and woman—as monk and virgin, their sexuality eliminated by being renounced—might yet wander together over the bleak mountainsides of Syria, as Adam and Eve had once stood, upon the flowering slopes of Paradise, untouched by gender and by its present, disturbing sexual ache.<sup>24</sup>

However, it is difficult—if not impossible—for me to imagine a human being as totally lacking in gender status.<sup>25</sup> Pronger reminds us that “gender myth filters experience without our being aware of it for the most part.”<sup>26</sup>

To be human is to be gendered—at some place, at some time: “To be free of gender would be to live a social and erotic life, to see oneself and others, without the filter of gender.”<sup>27</sup> Monastic consecration entails the pledge of ongoing asceticism and the promise of continual conversion (*conversatio morum suorum*). The early monastic writers Anthony, Athanasius, and John Climacus believed that, even while inhabiting this earthly body, we already possess a foretaste of the spiritual, resurrection body if we keep ourselves pure in pursuing the ascetical life.<sup>28</sup> Thus, even as they live in their natural, physical (biologically sexed) bodies, monastics anticipate here on earth, in a “realized eschatological” way, the glorified or spiritual bodies yet to come (1 Cor 15:35-50 NRSV). This attitude was already evident among early Christians in their dedication to *encrateia* (conti-

<sup>24</sup> Peter Brown, “East and West: The New Morality,” in *A History of Private Life, I. From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, ed. Paul Veyne, 297–311 (Cambridge, MA: Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 297.

<sup>25</sup> “The force of gender categories in society makes it impossible for us to move through our lives in a nongendered way, and impossible not to behave in a way that brings out gendered behavior in others” (Penelope Eckert, and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 50).

<sup>26</sup> Brian Pronger, *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 57.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>28</sup> Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 109n182. According to Athanasius’s *Life of Antony*, “asceticism has not subverted Antony’s physicality but restored it to its ‘natural state,’ that is to say, to its true and proper condition as intended by God” (Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 3–15 [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 11).

nence): “What is interesting about this focus . . . is that their asceticism, their sexual renunciation which embodies both the purity of the first creation and the immortality of the angelic life, actually brings the idyllic past and the religious ideal of the eschaton into the present.”<sup>29</sup> As Christians, we believe the resurrection of the body means that our bodies will retain the sexual organs that are marks of our dimorphism as males and females here below (as St. Jerome insisted):

Despite Jerome’s claim that he affirms a “same flesh” doctrine of the resurrection, modern readers can note the ways in which he modifies the “physicality” of his stated position. Of course, he asserts, the flesh of the resurrection will be “glorious” and “immortal,” unlike our present flesh. Certainly we will not eat or drink in the afterlife, *nor use the sexual organs that Jerome nonetheless so adamantly asserts we will possess.*<sup>30</sup>

However, will the statements by Jesus that we will become “like angels in heaven” (Matt 22:30 NRSV) and that we “neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt 22:30 NRSV) imply that this resurrection body will no longer function sexually, since biological reproduction has been superseded in our glorified or spiritual bodies?<sup>31</sup> If so, the words of St. Paul that “*there is no longer male or female*; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28 NRSV; emphasis added) and that “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17 NRSV) lend weight to this reconfigured *monastic* gender status model.

### The Glorified/Spiritual Body and Postresurrection Gender

As a biological organism, the human being inhabits this

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth A. Castelli, “Asceticism—Audience and Resistance: Response to the Three Preceding Papers,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 178–87 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 182.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 136 (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup> “Sexuality was identified as an essential element of earthly life, but one which was extraneous to eschatological existence” (Giulia Sfameni Gasparro, “Asceticism and Anthropology: *Enkrateia* and ‘Double Creation’ in Early Christianity,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 127–46 [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 135).

earth in a physical body that ingests nourishment, expresses itself in movement, and is capable of creating new human beings through its sexual and reproductive potential, among other things. But, as “death comes to all” (Rom 5:12; my paraphrase), what do we, as Christians, believe happens to our bodies in the *eschaton* (final times)? We profess “the resurrection of the body” in our creedal formula, but how will our postresurrection bodies differ from their current physical, biological form? Paul wrestles with this question in his classic statement in the First Letter to the Corinthians:

*We profess “the resurrection of the body” in our creedal formula, but how will our postresurrection bodies differ from their current physical, biological form?*

But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body

that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, and it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven (1 Cor 15:35-50 NRSV).

Analogous to his ruminations about physical and the spiritual bodies, St. Paul also wrestled with the male (masculine)/female (feminine) distinction as reflected in the scriptural evi-

dence. His apocalyptic messianism as expressed in “the new creation” in Galatians 3:28 unifies males and females in the same asceticism. Could his thinking here be hearkening back to the protological “first creation” of the primordial human being in Genesis?

The primal human in Eden is asexual and pre-gendered. Both sex and gender appear in the story with the creation of the woman. However, in a sequential reading of Genesis 1–2 one might argue that the two sexes and genders presented in Gen 1:26–28 exist in archetypal form in the original earth creature in Gen 2:7 from whom the LORD God takes the rib in order to create the woman.<sup>32</sup>

It is this asceticism, in particular, that later comes to supplant martyrdom in undergirding the monastic vocation.<sup>33</sup> These biological males and females retain the anatomical distinctions of their sex, but because of their monastic status, they no longer engage their procreativity.<sup>34</sup> Thus, organs of reproductive biology have diminished importance in defining gender: “Surely it was the biological, procreative role of both sexes—male and female—which Paul had invalidated.”<sup>35</sup> Paul speculates about the glorified, resurrection body in 1 Corinthians. In Galatians, he is more concerned about tackling the themes of diversity and unity: “[As] a closer look at the word material and the textual structures of the letter shows, the reconceptualization of male and female in general . . . is right at the core of Paul’s messianic argument.”<sup>36</sup> In Galatians 3:28, Paul’s apocalyptic messianism unifies males and females in the same asceticism: “What does Paul tell the Galatians, if he declares biological sex (ἀρσεν and θήλυ) in 3.28 as no longer existent and one in Christ?”<sup>37</sup> Biological male and female monastics retain the anatomical distinctions of their respective sex, but they prescind from realizing their procreative potential: “If male (in its procreative role) is no longer male as it used to be—what happens to the female (θήλυ)?”<sup>38</sup> Thus, these biological markers have diminished importance in defining *gender*: “Paul’s concept of oneness in Christ according

<sup>32</sup> Launderville, *Celibacy in the Ancient World*, 370.

<sup>33</sup> “The paradox of change and continuity that characterizes theological and hagiographical descriptions of the risen body seems to originate in the facts of martyrdom” (Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 44).

<sup>34</sup> “Declaring the end of polarity in terms of the new creation, Paul does not proclaim the erasure of sexual (or any other) difference, but the end of the social hierarchies and exclusions (re) produced by it” (Brigitte Kahl, “No Longer Male: Masculinity Struggles behind Galatians 3.28?” *JSNT* 79 [2000]: 44). In other words, Paul emphasizes *gender* over *sex*.

<sup>35</sup> Kahl, “No Longer Male,” 48.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

to Gal. 3.28 thus is a liberating vision of egalitarian inclusiveness; it rejects hierarchy but not difference as such.”<sup>39</sup> Are there gender-variant references here, “this apocalyptic-messianic rethinking of oneness,”<sup>40</sup> which might support the idea of a monastic gender status? “Does Paul maybe speak about messianic “oneness” in male terms as he indeed primarily addresses men—but not in order to confirm, but rather to undermine their established notions of maleness?”<sup>41</sup>

Paul’s concern for the physical and anatomical realities to be manifested in the new creation likewise finds support in the cultural customs to be overshadowed in the end-times. The institution of marriage is the one most closely tied to the union of males and females in the procreative biblical injunction to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28 NRSV). In the Gospel of Matthew, we read these words of Jesus: “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven” (Matt 22:30 NRSV). The parallel passage in the Gospel of Luke adds a bit more detail: “Jesus said to them, ‘Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection’” (Luke 20:34–36 NRSV). Marriage has no place among angelic beings.<sup>42</sup> But how can we think of the bodies of men and women monastics in the present age to be akin to the bodies of angels?<sup>43</sup> The early Christian theologian Origen illuminates this paradox.

### Origen

Origen (185–ca. 254 CE), early Christian theologian and scholar, purportedly gave us a theory of the origin of the soul. This theory (likely elaborated by some of his followers collectively referred to as “Origenists”) held that precosmic, rational souls (“minds”) preexisted the bodies into which these souls later descended. Because of the dualistic tone of such a theory, emphasizing, as it does, the separation between soul and body, some later theologians came to view Origen’s

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> “This angelic condition was best expressed when used to define the situation of virgins and continent men who, like the angels, did not marry. The situation of the first virgin creatures in Paradise before the sin was characterized by their similarity to the angels” (Gasparro, “Asceticism and Anthropology,” 135).

<sup>43</sup> “[S]ince there was no sex in primordial Paradise nor is there marriage in heaven, angels are virgins in a world in which sex has no place. Angels are undifferentiated as to gender. In a world in which sex is instinct with power to tempt, virginity represents the ascetic ideal to become angelic. In the process, one has the potential to become superior to angels” (Christopher Buck, “Sapiential *Theōsis*: A New Reading of Ephrem the Syrian’s *Hymns on Paradise*,” *The Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 90, no. 1 [1991]: 105).



theory as “suspicious,” even bordering on heresy. One of these was St. Jerome (ca. 347–420 CE), a Bible translator, apologist, and father of the church, whose early formation was marked by the teachings of Origen. Yet, Origen had his own take on the nature of the postresurrection body:

That Origen had a subtle and often unappreciated understanding of the “spiritual body” has been vigorously argued in recent years by several scholars. . . . [T]he most cogent modern scholarship on the subject singles out Origen’s notion that there is a “corporeal form” that provides this identity, an *eidōs*. . . . It seems likely that this teaching could be taken as an “orthodox” interpretation of the resurrection body—if commentators had so wished to interpret it.<sup>44</sup>

Even Jerome, however, “does not fail to point out that the body of the ascetic here below experiences both a continuation of the agony of martyrdom and a foretaste of the angelic life of heaven.”<sup>45</sup> Let us then consider “Origen’s notion of the resurrection body as a corporeal *eidōs* that survives the physical body’s dissolution.”<sup>46</sup> For Origen it is this *eidōs* that absorbs and evens out the physical changes (due to aging or health conditions, for example) the body experiences in this earthly life and that re-presents itself in the resurrection body.<sup>47</sup> How did it happen that the physical bodies of holy men and women became so closely affiliated with the bodies of angels? Indeed, it was said of one of the Desert Fathers that “he had attained the angelic state.”<sup>48</sup>

[T]he existential status of virgins and continent men was, to varying degrees, likened to that of the angels. It was seen as an earthly sign and foretaste of the blessed state of the resurrected. . . . [T]he definition of virgins and continent men in terms of their

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similarity to angels was such a widespread practice as to seem almost banal. Starting in the fourth century, this theme would find one of its most typical expressions in the figure of the monk as *bios angelikos* and would recur again and again in ascetically inspired patristic literature and numerous encratic texts without undergoing substantial variation.<sup>49</sup>

Those eremitical monastics whom we designate as *abbas* and *ammas* (Desert Fathers and Mothers) held the life of the angels in high esteem. As an example, “Abba Macarius said, ‘The rank of monk is like that of the angels. Just as the angels stand in the Lord’s presence at all times and no earthly thing hinders them from standing in his presence, so too it is with the monk: it is fitting that he should be like the angels his whole life. In doing this he will fulfill the word of our Savior who

commands each of us to *deny himself and take up his cross and follow him.*”<sup>50</sup> Liturgically, the correspondence between angels and those monastics espousing the communal life was most evident. From earliest days, the cenobitic antiphonal monastic choirs were thought to model the heavenly choirs of angels continually surrounding the throne of God and singing God’s praises. The Rule of Benedict, the charter document undergirding the Benedictine Order and the rule that guided the operation of an array of ancient monastic communities, acknowledges this angelic correspondence: “*In the presence of the angels I will sing to you* (Ps 137[138]:1). Let us consider, then, how we ought to behave in the presence of God and his angels . . .” [RB 19.5–6].<sup>51</sup> Notwithstanding the fact that some of the teachings of Origen and those of the Encratites were later declared heretical by church authorities, the associations forged in these early centuries between substantive, biological bodies living in the here and now and their sacred, angelic—even magical—qualities were never completely laid to rest, and in later centuries blossomed into the cult of *relics*.

## Conclusion

“Still in the corruptible flesh!” was the somber response one of my confreres used to quip when he was asked how things were going. Now that he has passed on, I presume my Benedictine brother will experience the fullness of life in his spiritual body: “Referring to this risen body Paul speaks of a ‘spiritual body’ (see 1 Cor. 15). This means . . . that the body of Christ is now totally moved by love, that it expresses in perfection what the body of man is meant to express from its

<sup>49</sup> Gasparro, “Asceticism and Anthropology,” 1350.

<sup>50</sup> Vivian, *Becoming Fire*, 409 (emphasis in original).

<sup>51</sup> Timothy Fry, and others, eds., *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 217 (emphasis in original).

<sup>44</sup> Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 93.

<sup>45</sup> Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 94.

<sup>46</sup> Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*, 176.

<sup>47</sup> “The point of Origen’s denial of sexual difference in heaven is clearly that we should begin to be sexless here on earth by practicing continence. . . . Origen argued that since we will one day be like angels—i.e., without sex—we should begin now to be what is promised” (Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 67n31).

<sup>48</sup> Tim Vivian, ed., *Becoming Fire: Through the Year with the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Cistercian Studies Series: Number Two Hundred Twenty-Five (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, Liturgical Press, 2008), 73.

creation: a life in relationship with God and the others.”<sup>52</sup> But he got me thinking. As mortals, we have no direct experience here and now of what configuration our glorified bodies will assume in the resurrected life won for us by our Lord Jesus Christ. And the scriptural data only hint at what might be. Like Origen and some of our other patristic forebears, we are at the mercy of our constructive imaginations.

However, in our hope to regain the preternatural gifts of our first parents through the merging of protology and eschatology, we can make some educated guesses. Like the postresurrection body of the second Adam, we will still be recognizable, but changed. Current biological functions like eating and drinking will no longer be necessary, and sexual and procreative potentials may become atavistic, even while retaining the anatomy that once animated them. The gendered designations of masculine and feminine that differentiate us in our earthly existence and that structure so many of our social and familial roles may well become faded when exposed to the transfigured glory of the beatific vision. With the exception of our enfleshed transformation, we just might come to more closely resemble the incorporeal angels that populate the heavenly pantheon. Jesus himself said that we would become like angels, and marriage will no longer be an option.

When one articulates this tenuous assemblage of clues, the constellation that emerges looks more and more like an intensified version of the ascetical prescriptions of the monastic life. Thus have my theological ruminations led me to consider the possibility that the consecrated bodies of monastics, like relics, may signal a foretaste of what our mortal bodies are yet to become.

[T]he transfiguration, transformation, of the bodies of the few great ascetics on earth signaled to the av-

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<sup>52</sup> José Granados, “The Christian Confession of Faith in Jesus Christ,” in *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, ed. Karl Josef Becker and Ilaria Morali, 179–206, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2010), 196.

erage ascetics their future inheritance at the Resurrection. . . . The Resurrection state was to be like Adam’s state before the Fall . . . The “glorified bodies” of the saints were evidence of Christian eschatological and soteriological doctrine.<sup>53</sup>

In proposing a gender-variant status for our spiritual bodies, I am not trying to destroy or deconstruct the masculinity or femininity of men and women in our own day and age, and I realize how important these gender designations are for our understanding and appreciation of the history and integrity of the nuclear family unit. On the other hand, for those who have embarked on the monastic path of chaste celibacy and the constellation of ascetical practices this path entails, we must take seriously the fact that “[Tertullian] speaks much of asceticism as a kind of martyrdom that prepares for resurrection.”<sup>54</sup> After all, the protracted “white martyrdom” of monasticism came to supplant the “red martyrdom” of the earliest Christian witnesses.<sup>55</sup>

This exercise in speculative theology has, perhaps, demonstrated nothing constructive or definitive about the nature of our glorified, spiritual bodies. But it may just help point out another way that monastic life and witness might model the mystery of our future glory.

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<sup>53</sup> William C. Bushell, “Psychophysiological and Comparative/Analysis of Ascetic-Meditational Discipline: Toward a New Theory of Asceticism,” in *Asceticism*, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, 553–75 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 557.

<sup>54</sup> Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity*, 48.

<sup>55</sup> E. E. Malone, *The Monk and the Martyr: The Monk as the Successor of the Martyr* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950).

*An alumnus of Saint John’s School of Theology Seminary, Brother Aaron Raverty, OSB completed a Master of Arts degree in Systematic Theology in 1977 with an emphasis in theological anthropology. He has since earned a Ph.D. in Sociocultural Anthropology (1990) from the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, with a concentration in the anthropology of religion. From data collected during a recent sabbatical in Colorado, he is currently writing a book with the tentative title Anthropological Method and Interreligious Dialogue: The Crestone Project.*



*Hope*, Susan Forshey