

Sex, Race, and Culture: Constructing Theological Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century

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Abstract

Pre-Vatican II theological anthropology focused attention on the exercise of human freedom as embodied in time and oriented to community. Post-Vatican II theology has deepened this trajectory by reflecting on the specific conditions and experiences of human embodiment, as well as the cultural and historical contexts that ground efforts to realize the ideal of persons-in-community. This article explores the contributions of theological anthropologies that take seriously gender, race, history, and culture in theology, and argues for further contemporary, enculturated, and embodied reflections on sin and grace.

Keywords

black theology, Christian anthropology, essentialism, feminist theology, Latino/a theology, liberation theology, womanist theology.

“What is it to be human, really?”¹ This is the fundamental question underlying Christian theological anthropology. It is also the question haunting all who seek to live well today, amid the whirlwind of social and technological changes

1. Christopher Carter began his presentation during a session on “Race, Gender, Animals, and Theology: Trouble at the Intersection” at the American Academy of Religion in Denver,

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sweeping away established customs and ushering in new, even unprecedented, ways of life. How can one live a truly human life while seemingly connected to the whole world, yet at the same time isolated by a lack of face-to-face interactions? What does it mean to foster community in an individualistic culture, while still protecting the dignity of each unique person? Or does it even make sense to focus on the distinctness of humanity given increasing knowledge about the abilities of nonhuman animals or the development of artificial intelligence?

These questions compel theologians further to ask, What wisdom might the Christian tradition contribute to the daunting task of determining how to live a good and fully human life in this still young twenty-first century?

In taking up the task of responding to the challenges of the modern world, early twentieth-century theological anthropology devotes a great deal of attention to human freedom, especially as this freedom is exercised in a dynamic and changing world that nevertheless remains fallen-yet-redeemed, a world of sin and grace.² Since human freedom is experienced within space and time, the *corporeal*, *contextual*, and *communal* aspects of being human are also matters of concern in the theological anthropology leading up to and including the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

Postconciliar theological anthropology, an increasingly lay and diverse enterprise, differs considerably in tone and topic from pre-Vatican II theology, yet continues to develop the trajectory of earlier twentieth-century theological anthropology. The corporeality or embodiment of the human person, the significance of history and culture as the context of human life, and the relational or communal aspects of being human become increasingly central to theological accounts of personhood, even while the abstractions of earlier theological discussions of human embodiment and historicity are critiqued. After all, to be embodied is to experience oneself and to be experienced by others according to gendered and—at least since modernity—racialized constructs. When theology prescind from reflecting on the specific experiences of embodiment in particular historical moments and within distinct cultures, then too often the operative presumption is that the normative human being is male, socially privileged, and a “white” European or Euro-American.

As will be discussed below, theological critiques of the often hidden assumptions of gender and racial superiority, as well as the privileging of the historical and cultural contexts of the elite, are indispensable to contemporary theological anthropology and to the church’s task to help heal the current polarization of so much of the world. If a truly human life is one lived in communities enriched by and supportive of the diversity that is integral to humanity, then this ongoing work in theological anthropology has much to contribute to overcoming the tribal divisions and the growing individualism that distort not only society but also the church.

Colorado with this phrasing of the question of theological anthropology (November 19, 2018).

2. Given limitations of space, I will focus primarily, but not exclusively, on the Catholic theological tradition, which is, of course, informed by dialogues with non-Catholic theology but also by its distinct responsibility to the Catholic tradition and by ecclesial documents.

Yet the topics of sin and grace that were so prominent in the early to mid-twentieth century continue to be essential for any theological anthropology that is appropriate to the Christian tradition and to the reality of the world situation today. Otherwise, the approach to human life and society is overly optimistic, leaving Christians without a sustaining hope when they encounter the enduring and divisive power of sin in themselves, in society, and in the church. While greater specificity in theologizing corporeality, contextuality, and communality is crucial for any theological anthropology for our time, so too is engagement with the ways in which these categories and all aspects of being human are loci for encountering human sin and divine grace.

Twentieth-Century Theological Anthropology through the Second Vatican Council

It is perhaps not surprising that freedom emerged as a major theme in the theological anthropology of the first half of the twentieth century. While all but strictly predestinarian reflections on the Christian moral life generally presume some degree of freedom in the person's response to grace, the historical and political revolutions of modernity brought increased attention to human freedom, especially in its sociopolitical dimensions. Amid dramatic societal change, the significance of freedom in determining the meaning of one's life, particularly as lived in responsibility for society and history, became dominant concerns of Western philosophy and so also of Euro-American theology.³

In contrast to the unconditional, open-ended freedom so notably defended by Jean-Paul Sartre, Christian theological anthropology throughout this period maintains that the human person is oriented to fulfillment in relation to God.⁴ Karl Rahner's theological anthropology is a notable example, focusing on freedom exercised in response to the graced offer of a divine self-communication received in and through the finite realities of this world.⁵ Human freedom is not self-constituting but, as Hans Urs von Balthasar also emphasizes, received from and oriented to God.⁶

This freedom is, of course, further qualified by the reality of sin and guilt in a fallen world, a point that neo-orthodox theologians particularly champion in opposition to the overly optimistic liberal theologies of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the doctrine of

3. See the brief but astute discussion in Susan A. Ross, *Anthropology: Seeking Light and Beauty* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012), 56–57.

4. See especially Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. and intro. by Philip Mairet (London: Methuen, 1948).

5. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), esp. 116–37.

6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theological Anthropology*, trans. Benziger Verlag (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967), esp. 87–93. See also Stephen J. Duffy, *The Graced Horizon: Nature and Grace in Catholic Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 115–34; and Michelle A. Gonzalez, "Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Contemporary Catholic Feminist Theology," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 566–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390406500304>.

original sin is fundamental to Reinhold Niebuhr's political theology, providing the foundation for his argument that democracy is not only possible because humans are capable of transcending their self-interest, but democracy is also necessary because humans are so inclined to selfishness that no one can be trusted with unchecked power.⁷

The relations between human nature, sin, and grace thus remain central to theological reflections on human freedom in the first half of the twentieth century. In the Catholic theological community, theologians associated with *nouvelle théologie* sought to provide a better account of the universal and redemptive effects of grace in order to overcome the extrinsicism of the neo-Scholastic "two-tiered" theology that keeps nature and grace largely separate. This two-tiered neo-Scholastic approach is successful in preserving the gratuity of grace while retaining the integrity of human nature, which is conceived as able on its own to achieve a natural end of life that is defined as distinct from the supernatural end made possible by grace. The problem with this two-tiered approach is that grace is then perceived as having little to do with transforming nature, so that much of human life (especially as organized in society) is held to be unaffected by grace. As seen in the debates on grace in the theologies of Henri de Lubac and Karl Rahner, the challenge for the "new theology" is to articulate the role of grace in perfecting nature in a way that protects the integrity of nature and the gratuity of grace, yet without the extrinsicism that makes grace irrelevant to so much of human life in this world.⁸

With the rejection of neo-Scholastic extrinsicism, the corporeal, historical, and social dimensions of life through which humans encounter transforming grace emerge as important foci of theological anthropology. Embodied, sensate human experience is integral to the process of transcendence toward God in Rahner's anthropology, for example, while Edward Schillebeeckx emphasizes that transcendent freedom is properly exercised in resistance to conditions causing human suffering. The orientation to the divine Other is realized for these theologians in embodied experiences, especially in relation to human community and history. The corporeal and contextual person is an inherently communal being.⁹

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7. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of its Traditional Defense*, intro. by Gary Dorrien (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), xxxii.
 8. See especially Henry de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Herder & Herder, 1967), 68–96; de Lubac's earlier *Surnaturel: Études Historiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1946); Rahner's *Foundations*, 116–37; the excellent discussion in David Coffey, "The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 95–118, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390406500135>; and the concise discussion in Duffy, *Graced Horizon*, 50–65.
 9. For Rahner's views, see especially Rahner, *Foundations*, 24–43; the excellent summary available in Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, new and rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), 150–51, and the discussions in Duffy, *Graced*, 85–102 and in Miguel H. Díaz, *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 79–110. For Schillebeeckx's anthropology, see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1983), esp. 837–39, as well as the discussions in Elizabeth K. Tillar, "Critical Remembrance

This understanding of the dignity of the person as a social being whose freedom is experienced in and through the particular conditions of embodiment in history and society is embraced in the theological anthropology of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. The importance of human freedom is evident in *Dignitatis Humanae*, which (finally!) defended religious freedom for all on the grounds that such freedom is integral to the dignity of the human person whom God intends to seek the truth without coercion. Officially released on the same day as *Dignitatis Humanae* (December 7, 1965), *Gaudium et Spes* further accentuates the theological significance of freedom in its discussion of the church's role in cooperating with God and with the rest of humanity toward the healing transformation of the world. As Rosemary Carbine has noted, *Gaudium et Spes* outlines a relational anthropology, an anthropology that I contend is based on the eschatological goal of the communion of all with/in God articulated in the previously released document, *Lumen Gentium*.¹⁰ This is no two-tiered or extrinsicist perspective; to the contrary, grace is intended to transform all aspects of human relationships in society, including family, culture, the economy, and international relations.

Yet, as becomes obvious to many theologians in the decades following the Second Vatican Council, the academic theological anthropology in this period is overly abstract, androcentric, and even Eurocentric. Even while these theologians defend the centrality of embodiment, historicity, and relationality to being human, they pay little attention to the actual experiences of embodiment and the real histories and communities in which people live. Although a coming "world church" is envisioned, theology remains the province of clerical men who are overwhelmingly white and educated in Europe or Eurocentric universities.¹¹ Their theological anthropology reflects belief in the universality of their own embodied, contextual experiences.

and Eschatological Hope in Edward Schillebeeckx's Theology of Suffering for Others," *Heythrop Journal* 44 (2003): 15–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2265.t01-1-00212>; and in Helen Bergin, "Edward Schillebeeckx and the Suffering Human Being," *International Journal of Public Theology* 4 (2010): 466–82, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156973210X526436>. While a thorough discussion of the major theologians contributing to the development of corporeality, contextuality, and communality in the first half of the twentieth century is beyond the scope of this article, any such treatment should include Karl Barth's relational ontology as well as Paul Tillich's polarities.

10. Rosemary P. Carbine, "'Artisans of a New Humanity': Revisioning the Public Church in a Feminist Perspective," in *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder*, Susan Abraham and Elena Procaro-Foley, eds. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 184. See also Joseph Xavier, "Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes* and Fundamental Theology," *Gregorianum* 91 (2010): 124–36, <http://www.jstor.org.sandiego.idm.oclc.org/stable/44322673>.
11. Karl Rahner discusses a non-Eurocentric vision of the Roman Catholic Church especially in his *Concern for the Church*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 103–14.

Corporeality: Human Embodiment as Sexed, Raced, and Differentlyabled

The presumption of the universality of a particular embodied, contextual experience must be questioned. Here I undertake a critique of how theology often envisions the normative, embodied person, through the lenses of sex and gender, race, and bodily normativity.

Sex and Gender

Feminist theologians have been among the strongest and earliest critics of the abstraction of modern theology's treatment of embodiment. Humans are not merely embodied, they point out, but embodied as sexual beings with different reproductive roles and experiences, a difference that, when noted in the Christian tradition, has usually been cited as evidence of female inferiority.¹² To be sure, there are notable affirmations of the equal (societal) rights of men and women in some mid-century church teachings, including those of the Second Vatican Council. Yet theology continues to be based nearly entirely on male experience and proceeds on the hidden assumption that the theological subject—the normative human envisioned in theological anthropology—is a (usually heterosexual) male.

Valery Saiving's early criticism of androcentrism, published in 1960, remains an astute analysis of male experience presented as universal. In "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," Saiving argues that the common identification of pride as the paradigmatic human sin does not reflect universal human experience but rather that of men. Women's temptation, Saiving contends, is less likely to be pride than denial of the self, as women are encouraged to sacrifice their own development in order to foster the lives of men and children.¹³ She thus draws attention to the fact that male-centered theology is not merely exclusive of women's reality but in fact serves as an instrument of women's oppression: women who dare to claim the right to self-care are often subjected to spiritual opprobrium for their sinful pride.

Inspired more directly by Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 classic *The Second Sex*, Mary Daly and Rosemary Ruether are among the first to carry forward Saiving's critique of androcentrism in Christian tradition and theology.¹⁴ They agree with de Beauvoir that, in Christianity as well as in much of Western culture, women are the projected "other," defined by men and on the basis of men's needs and desires. For

12. See especially the discussion in Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 97–102.

13. Valerie Goldstein Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (1960): 100–12, <https://doi.org/10.1086/485231>.

14. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Random House, 1974); Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 53–73; and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 4.

Ruether and the early Daly, de Beauvoir's analysis provides the starting point for a project of extensive theological reform seeking to undo the millennia-old Christian portrayal of women as a lesser form of humanity, as inherently immature, morally weaker, and less capable of reason than the males who set the standard for full human personhood.

Ruether and Daly also resist the nineteenth-century shift to celebrating women's superior goodness, as this approach does not, in fact, truly value women as fully human, or even as actual moral agents. Unlike men who exercise reason and will in their moral choices (and thus develop moral character), women's supposed instinctual goodness is seen as a natural inclination rather than a matter of moral reasoning and will. Regardless of whether women are judged to be more inclined to evil or to good, then, the same conclusion is reached: women's weaker moral reasoning requires male governance and protection from the corruptions of public life and leadership.

Ruether's groundbreaking work includes a diagnosis of the binary system of thought underlying these devaluations of women and of anyone or anything else that happens to be in the position of the less valued category. Referred to as hierarchical dualism in later feminist theology, this binary thinking defines and devalues women in relation to men, people of color in relation to white people, body and emotion in relation to spirit and reason, and nature in relation to culture. Ruether was ahead of her time with her realization that sexism, racism, and the destruction of the natural world are mutually related and must be dismantled together. A truly liberating theological anthropology, as she argues, requires a deep revisioning of what it means to be human not only in the relations between the sexes, but also in race relations as well as in the construal of humanity's relationship to the natural world.¹⁵

Analysis of this binary system also helps to explain why female images of the divine, and the idea of women priests representing God, elicit such a strong negative reaction from some people. The problem may be less a matter of the authority of Scripture and tradition than of unconscious and deeply anthropological associations between the valued categories in each binary, such that God, male, reason, and spirit seem naturally to go together. It follows that minor adjustments to the structures of hierarchical dualism will not suffice: the binary system must be deconstructed and replaced with ways of understanding the mutual, and non-hierarchical, interconnectivity of all of creation.¹⁶

This approach has gained wide support among feminists, notwithstanding a tendency of some in the early years of this second wave of feminism to insist that the oppression of women is so basic and totalizing as to diminish the significance of any other oppression. Despite their many differences and lively debates, feminist theologians today

15. Ruether, *New Woman*, esp. 78–79. See also the discussion by Mary Ann Hinsdale, “Heeding the Voices: An Historical Overview,” in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 26. A succinct but clear analysis of hierarchical dualism is provided by Elizabeth Johnson in her *Women, Earth, and Creator Spirit* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1993), 10–22.

16. Ruether, *New Woman*, esp. 78–79.

largely agree with Ruether's conclusion that a theological affirmation of the full humanity of women cannot be sustained without the systematic dismantling of the hierarchical dualisms supporting the oppression not only of women but of much of the world.¹⁷ Ecofeminism is one of the most developed—and, given the dangers of climate change, crucially important—of these feminist projects seeking to unravel this web of oppression, as feminists in and beyond theology have noted the connections between the devaluations of women, of the body, and of nature.¹⁸

Feminist theology is, of course, not only critical but also constructive as it moves beyond pointing out the denigration of women to theologizing women's experience as potentially revelatory of the divine. Significant theological work has been developed through reflection on explicitly female experiences such as giving birth or mothering.¹⁹ Other experiences that are not specific to women but have been theologically neglected as overly physical or particular have also received attention in the theologies women are developing. Feminist theologies have thus fruitfully explored the diversity of embodied human experiences through attention to such topics as friendship, beauty in daily life, vulnerability, and sexual desire.²⁰

Yet a profoundly anthropological question continues to provoke theological reflection even beyond the academy: Do women's experiences allow for insights not available to men, or vice versa? Do women share a unique perspective, rooted in a distinct feminine nature or "genius"? In other words, how much theological difference do women's experiences really make?

The question of whether there are essential differences in nature, character, and abilities between men and women is a neuralgic topic in the church and in theology, in no small part because the answer has implications for the assignment of ecclesial and

17. A similar anthropological argument has been recently proffered by Ellen Armour, who draws on the work of Michel de Foucault in developing her account of the modern "Man" as defined against his raced, sexed, animal, and divine others, whose policing in contemporary US society is essential to this concept of Man. See Ellen T. Armour, *Signs and Wonders: Theology After Modernity* (New York: Columbia University, 2016).

18. See especially Ivonne Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999); Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 219–54; and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Integrating Feminism, Globalization, and World Religions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

19. Some notable recent examples are Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London / New York: Routledge, 2006); Michele Saracino, *Being about Borders: A Christian Anthropology of Difference* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011); Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, *The Power and Vulnerability of Love: A Theological Anthropology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015).

20. In addition to the works by Beattie, Saracino, and Gandolfo above, see Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1987); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009); Susie Paulik Babka, *Through the Dark Field: The Incarnation through an Aesthetics of Vulnerability* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2017); and Ross, *Anthropology*.

social roles, along with access to the power that accompanies some of these roles. This issue also has significance beyond concerns with sex and gender, since what is at stake here is the fundamental question of how significant diverse embodiment is to theological anthropology.

Considered from the perspective of feminist theologies, neither of the obvious alternatives is desirable.²¹ On the one hand, feminist theologians have good reason to resist an androgyny or unisex theory in which women's differences yet again make no difference. Does not such androgyny erase women, and impose a male-generated norm of humanity on all? On the other hand, any description of fundamental distinctions in character or nature between the sexes risks essentializing culturally determined—and often oppressive—roles that limit and usually devalue women.²² Women seeking full self-development have too often been accused of being unfeminine and behaving contrary to their “true nature” for gender essentialism not to raise suspicions among feminists. While feminists generally support the value of women's distinct experiences, there is an exasperating paradox inherent in the idea that women need to be told repeatedly by men how to live in accord with their own female “nature.”²³

One of the most influential responses to this conundrum today is the gender complementarity that emphasizes an equality-in-difference between men and women. Prudence Allen has developed a detailed scholarly defense of this position, which she finds best articulated in the work of Pope John Paul II; indeed, she calls him “the founder of integral gender complementarity.”²⁴ In Allen's view, the common alternatives of gender uniformity and gender polarity are both unacceptable: the first ignores sexual differences and thus disrupts the integrity of the body–soul unity, whereas the second defines sexual differences such that one gender is inherently superior to the other.²⁵ Allen believes that John Paul's integral sex complementarity avoids both errors: in his analysis, the sexes are equal but different.²⁶ Oriented to each other, men and women are fully human in themselves but together create a communion greater than the sum of its parts.²⁷ In this view, the physical differences between women and men lead to psychological and spiritual differences such that there is a distinctly feminine nature or “genius” for recognizing and relating to the particular person, along with a distinctly masculine inclination to protect and provide for others.²⁸

21. A more detailed discussion of the problems with essentialism and its usual alternatives is provided by Daniel P. Horan, “Beyond Essentialism and Complementarity: Toward a Theological Anthropology Rooted in *Haecceitas*,” *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 94–117, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563913519562>.

22. See especially Daly, *Church*, 100–17.

23. As Mary Daly comments with characteristic acuity, “It would seem that people would not have to be told authoritatively how to behave ‘naturally’” (*Church*, 117).

24. Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 3, *The Search for Communion of Persons: 1500–2015* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 442.

25. *The Concept of Woman*, esp. 8, 471.

26. *The Concept of Woman*, 464.

27. *The Concept of Woman*, 8, 467.

28. *The Concept of Woman*, 469, 476–78.

These specifically feminine and masculine “geniuses” enable women and men to make distinct contributions to society and to the church, according to Allen, at least when people freely accept and cooperate with their natural orientations.²⁹ In society, Allen underscores, the proper outcome is *not* separate spheres or jobs for men and women, but rather a difference in how one fulfills one’s role; that is, women should always exhibit a feminine attention to the particular needs of the persons around them, whereas men should exercise their responsibility to protect others.³⁰ In the church, however, gender complementarity *does* require different roles, as men and women relate as literal and symbolic grooms or brides in their orientation to each other and to the community they form. While downplaying the emphasis on a feminine receptivity to male initiative that is so prominent and dangerous in the work of von Balthasar, Allen nonetheless embraces the conclusion that women are symbolically beloved brides, whether in a married couple or in the religious state, whereas men are loving grooms in a marriage or as priests in relation to the church.³¹ Male religious emerge as an anomaly since they are physically male but analogically female (brides), yet so are lay men when considered as the (feminine) church. Why women cannot be analogically grooms and serve as priests is not adequately explained, though it is clear that Allen thinks that allowing women to take on the “male” role in church leadership would undermine the gendered system of human communion in a way that allowing—even requiring—some men to take the “female” role somehow does not.

Allen’s account of gender complementarity does succeed in taking sexual embodiment seriously, in affirming explicitly the equal dignity of men and women, and in refusing to reinforce sexist limitations on women’s contributions to society. Yet significant problems remain, especially for those committed to the full dignity of women in church and society. Allen’s gender complementarity continues to limit women’s service and leadership in the church, even while men’s roles are not similarly constrained. Additionally, she has not adequately explained why the logic that results in restricted ecclesial roles for women does not reinforce a similar limitation of women’s proper roles in society according to their “nature” so that, for example, women would be appropriate as nurturing teachers, but not in the protective roles of military or police officers. Given how frequently the conclusion that women and men should have different social roles is explicitly drawn by conservative Catholic and Protestant advocates of gender complementarity, it is not clear to this reader that Allen has successfully professed a gender complementarity that safeguards women’s full inclusion in society.

The lack of evidence supporting a biological basis for these distinct masculine and feminine “geniuses” is also problematic.³² Notwithstanding the repeated

29. *The Concept of Woman*, 478.

30. *The Concept of Woman*, 476.

31. *The Concept of Woman*, 481. See Tina Beattie’s devastating critique of von Balthasar’s danger to women in her *New Catholic Feminism*.

32. See the recent review of scientific studies by Daphna Joel and Cordelia Fine, “Can we Finally Stop Talking about ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ Brains?” *New York Times*, December 3, 2018.

insistence that integral gender complementarity takes embodiment seriously, the claims for gender differences are less evidently derived from the experience of sexual bodies than they are a projection of cultural and theological assumptions onto that bodily experience. Further, even if one is willing to accept the highly dubious assumption that gender and sex are inseparable, what room is there in this complementarity for those whose biological sex, either as phenotype or as genotype, does not fit the binary? Honest engagement with embodied experience surely requires grappling with the fact that nature is more inclined to continuums than to stark binaries.³³

Gender complementarity as thus developed also raises some serious challenges to established Christian doctrine. Is the equal dignity of men and women truly upheld when women are thought to be more naturally oriented to relationships with particular others than are men, who must learn from women how to develop authentic relationships?³⁴ Given the centrality of loving relations of self-gift in the Christian account of true personhood, are women now to be taken as the normative human and men as the defective or lesser form of humanity? This reversal leaves us with yet another denial of full humanity on the basis of sex. Additionally, when gender complementarity is taken as symbolic of the divine nature, the binary never manages to result in the sexes being equally representative of the divine. Allen's insistence on women's particular genius for authentic relationships lends considerable support to the conclusion that men are less able to image the divine communion of self-giving love, however much Allen resists this conclusion. On the other hand, efforts to make both male and female representative of the divine by inscribing male initiative and feminine receptivity into the relations between the persons of the Trinity invariably end in describing God as male in relation to a feminine/receptive humanity, so that it is women who again fail to fully image God.³⁵

"Critical" essentialism is an alternative that has been proposed as able to further the feminist theological project of taking sexual embodiment seriously while avoiding an ahistorical gender essentialism such as that of Allen and John Paul II. As advocated in a thought-provoking essay by Nancy Dallavalle, critical essentialism affirms that there are inherent differences in character or nature between men and women, yet also admits that any account of these differences will be a culturally embedded, historically specific interpretation. "While we have no unconstructed human access to the

33. Allen acknowledges exceptions to the rule of binary sexuality, but insists that these exceptions do not disprove that rule. Given the variety of exceptions, I am not convinced that a binary approach remains as obviously the rule of nature as Allen and Pope John Paul II contend. See Allen, *Search*, 466.

34. *Search*, 476–77.

35. These points are developed in Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Imago Dei, Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics," in *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Kari Elisabeth Børrensen (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1991), 267–91. See also Mary Catherine Hilkert, "Cry Beloved Image: Rethinking the Image of God," in *In the Embrace*, 190–205.

meaning of our creation as male and female,” she argues, “we can and should continue to plumb the mystery of biological sexuality as ‘holy work.’”³⁶

There should be no doubt that theologizing our sexual and other embodied experiences is indeed holy work, and it is work that mainstream feminist theology continues to do. However, I am not convinced that critical essentialism is a genuine advancement preferable to the more common feminist embrace of embodied diversity as revelatory of the divine. What is gained by insisting, even contrary to evidence, that there are universal acultural differences between male and female natures, when one agrees that any account of those differences is inevitably particular, understood and articulated according to one’s specific culture? How does this differ from simply exploring the implications of the culturally embedded gender experiences we actually have, as non-essentialist feminist theologies do?

The only practical difference I can see is that critical essentialism’s positing of provisionally interpreted but real gender difference inclines toward presumptions in favor of distinct—even if revisable—ecclesial and social roles, the very presumptions that have worked to constrict women’s possibilities. I further suspect that such efforts at provisional definitions of a putatively universal female experience will universalize elite white women’s experience, an outcome that Dallavalle, to her credit, seems at pains to avoid. Given post-structural theories of the fragmented, constructed, and contested self, gender essentialism seems increasingly untenable, whether “critical” or not.³⁷ More persuasive and more liberating is Elizabeth Johnson’s argument in favor of an “anthropological model of one human nature [that] moves beyond the contrasting models of either sex dualism or the sameness of abstract individuals towards the celebration of diversity as entirely normal.”³⁸

Race

Another major critique of the assumptions of modern theological anthropology is developed in black theologies. Even while affirming that race is clearly a historical/cultural construct, black theologians rightly insist that the racialization of bodies in the modern and contemporary periods demands theological scrutiny. Indeed, as James Cone has called theologians to acknowledge, theology is no more race neutral than it is gender neutral; when the presumed subject is a white male, as it has been and continues to be in much US theology, the full humanity of all black and brown peoples is implicitly denied.³⁹ This is all the more evidently the case in a society like the United

36. Nancy A. Dallavalle, “Neither Idolatry nor Iconoclasm: A Critical Essentialism for Catholic Feminist Theology,” *Horizons* 25 (1998): 23–42 at 39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0360966900030711>.

37. See Michele Saracino, “Moving Beyond the ‘One True Story,’” in *Frontiers*, 9–24; Ross, *Anthropology*, 67–84; and Beattie, *New Catholic*.

38. Elizabeth Johnson, “The Maleness of Christ,” in *The Special Nature of Women*, ed., Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza (Philadelphia: Trinity International, 1991), 108–16 at 111.

39. See especially James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1975), 1–15, and the discussion of James Cone’s challenge in Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture and Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 35–39.

States that has prospered through the enslavement of black people and that continues in practice to deny black and brown peoples the rights and protections accorded to white people. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has astutely noted, color-blindness is one of the strongest means of supporting racism today. The claim to “not see color” ignores the racial inequality that permeates society, leaves unchallenged the structures of black oppression, and implicitly supports the continuation of white or Euro-Americans as the norm for all humanity.⁴⁰

It is important to recognize that the turn to the subject (first in philosophy and then in theology) took place at the same time that the academy was developing racist scientific and philosophical rationalizations for the superiority of European people and civilization. To be sure, nineteenth-century scientific categorizations of race are no longer officially acceptable science, and the arguments of major eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers, including Hume, Kant, and Hegel, for the intellectual and cultural inferiority of black people are seldom defended (or even mentioned) in college curricula. Yet, as Dwight Hopkins reminds us, “elite white men (who claimed objective, rational, calm, and detached reason) provided the intellectual justification for the terrorist removal of dark indigenous people’s land, human bodies, water, cultural artifacts, ancestral bones, inventions, and national treasures.” The effects of this terrorist appropriation continues to structure power relations globally today.⁴¹

Building on the assumptions about white superiority developed in philosophy and physical anthropology, Christian arguments further justified the colonial dehumanization of black and brown peoples. Despite the long-standing Christian belief in one human race equally in need of and offered redemption through Jesus Christ, many began to support evolutionary polygenism that denied the unity of humanity. In any case, modern European Christians had little doubt that they were physically, morally, and culturally superior to the darker-skinned peoples of Africa and the Americas. The subjugation of these peoples and their lands could be religiously justified regardless of the outcome of the actual ecclesial debate on whether or not they were fully human: if not human, they could be subjugated without concern for their rights, yet if they were deemed human, that was all the more reason for the colonial expansion that would support Christian missions to save their souls.⁴²

A further and more biblically based justification of the enslavement of African and African-descended peoples became widespread in the United States. Black people were supposed to be descendants of Ham and so to have inherited the curse that condemned him and his descendants to slavery.⁴³ This idea of a biologically transmitted

40. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014). See also the discussion in Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 67–73.

41. Hopkins, *Being Human*, 137.

42. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); and Hopkins, *Being Human*, 148–59. See also Katie Walker Grimes, *Fugitive Saints and the Politics of Slavery* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017).

43. Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford / New York: Oxford University, 2002).

guilt and collective punishment was not, of course, new in Christianity; at least from the time of Augustine of Hippo original sin has been commonly thought of as physically transmitted. There is also the long-standing and pernicious tradition that all people of Jewish ancestry inherit the guilt—and due punishment—of their ancestors' putative rejection of Jesus. The idea of inherited sin has an important but deeply problematic history in the Christian tradition.

While these arguments for racial inferiority, whether of Jews or people of color, are no longer acceptable in most mainstream discourse, they are still defended by a vocal minority of white supremacists. More significant for theological anthropology, these ideas continue to function at least unconsciously in societal assumptions that make white privilege and the suffering inflicted on black people seem normal, and even just. As M. Shawn Copeland observes, “[i]n sacrilegious antiturgy, the agents of empire hand over red, yellow, brown, white, black, and poor bodies to the tyranny of neo-liberal capitalism, to the consuming forces of the market” which produces cheap goods through the oppressed labor of people of color.⁴⁴

Additionally, the criminalization of black people persists throughout the United States, with white citizens as well as the police perceiving black people to be dangerous threats simply on the basis of their skin color. This not only results in the undue surveillance, harassment, and even brutality black people regularly experience, but also normalizes the extraordinarily high incarceration rates of black and brown people. This criminalization, so devastating to black lives, families, and communities, has been described by Michelle Alexander as the “new Jim Crow.”⁴⁵

These ongoing attacks on the full humanity of black people are a practical distortion of theological anthropology, a contradiction to the Christian belief that all humans are made in the image of God, with uniqueness and a vocation to communion with all living things.⁴⁶ Racism thus diminishes the church: as Copeland reminds us, Gregory of Nyssa insists that “it is only in the *union of all the particular members* that the beauty of Christ's Body is complete.”⁴⁷ Copeland thus concludes, “unless our sisters and brothers are beside and with each of us, we are not the flesh of Christ” and we fail to reflect the diversity of the Trinity.⁴⁸

And yet, racism has not managed to erase the humanity of black people or to reduce their lives to ones solely of suffering and oppression. Strategies of resistance and survival continue along with the suffering and, as Delores Williams has pointed out, this

44. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 66. See also Teresa Delgado, “This is My Body . . . Given for You: Theological Anthropology *Latinamente*,” in *Frontiers*, 25–47.

45. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012). See also the excellent assessment of the bodily effects of being unprotected by society in Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon, 1996), 26–47.

46. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 24.

47. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* as cited in Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 82, emphasis original.

48. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 82, 104.

survival is itself potentially revelatory of the power of God.⁴⁹ Black and womanist theologians further challenge theology to attend not only to black oppression and suffering, but also to the creativity, beauty, and joy of black humanity as evident in daily life and in their contributions to culture and the arts.⁵⁰

The crucible experience of black oppression and resistance, suffering and joy, informs a Christian theological anthropology focused on the true humanity achieved in the fight against every oppression and for the full community of all. Hopkins astutely observes that this struggle for humanity requires opposition to “demonic individualism” along with the “historical amnesia” and “instantaneous fulfillment of desire” that are concomitant with this individualism.⁵¹ Despite what marketing would have us believe, authentic selfhood is not found in the instant gratification of self-centered desires, but rather in working so that all have a share in the community—and in the goods of the community that are meant for all. Copeland further argues for a Christian anthropology recognizing that true humanity is revealed in Jesus, who turned toward others in solidarity with their suffering, even to the point of a violently broken body not unlike that so frequently experienced by black people throughout US history.⁵² To be human, then, is to resist the destruction of the humanity of others and to build communities enriched by diversity, including the diversity that is marked on our bodies as sex, race, class, and even sexual orientation.⁵³

The fully human life of communion with God and with all of God’s diverse creation requires addressing the multiple (or intersectional) levels of injustice that degrade human embodiment.⁵⁴ The womanist critique of second-wave white feminists’ universalizing claim to represent the experience of all women has developed to include sustained reflections on class, sexual orientation, and even culture.⁵⁵ More recently, attention is turning to the connection between the oppression of

49. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

50. See for example Jeania Ree V. Moore, “African American Quilting and the Art of Being Human: Theological Aesthetics and Womanist Theological Anthropology,” in *Anglican Theological Review* 98 (2016): 457–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1594708>; and James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992).

51. Hopkins, *Being Human*, 5.

52. Copeland, *Enfleshing*, 86–90.

53. *Enfleshing*, 56. Hopkins and Copeland have produced the most developed theological anthropologies addressing assumptions about white normativity and supremacy. Among the Catholic theologians who are addressing race in theology and whose work has significant implications for theological anthropology are Katie Walker Grimes, esp. in her *Fugitive Saints*; Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010); and Karen Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

54. Nancy J. Ramsay, “Intersectionality: A Model for Addressing the Complexity of Oppression and Privilege,” in *Pastoral Psychology* 63 (2014): 453–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0360966900030711>.

55. Hopkins, *Being Human*, 39–44.

black people and the devaluation of animals, a fertile area for development. The racist association of black people with nonhuman animals suggests that the human–animal and the white–black binaries are mutually implicated and must be deconstructed together.⁵⁶

Ableism, Embodiment, and Social Media

Yet another concern about how theology envisions the normative, embodied person has been raised by disabilities studies. If the fully human person is imaged as a healthy, mature, “normally abled” adult at the height of his(!) strength and powers, a great deal of the human race will fail to meet this standard of being human. Indeed, since all humans were once babies and may—if blessed with longevity—become elderly, any discussion of human embodiment is seriously inadequate that fails to include human experiences of lacking “normal” abilities of strength, health, and independence. Vulnerability to such limitations is, after all, inherent in embodiment. Ableism thus raises a variety of complex issues for a theological anthropology committed to the corporeality of the person: Is there a degree of mental ability and health necessary for one to qualify as a human person? Are children and the elderly as human as adults in the prime of life? Most importantly, how can we construct our communities to be consistent with Christian belief in the dignity and inclusion of people of all physical and mental abilities?⁵⁷

A final issue that begs for more discussion than can be undertaken here is the meaning of being human as embodied creatures in the age of artificial intelligence, computers, and social media. Profound questions are being raised about the relation between human intelligence and artificial intelligence that seems to “think,” functioning creatively and beyond the programming. Are we entering a “transhuman” phase?⁵⁸ At the same time, social media is introducing a radically different, if not diminished, experience of human embodiment. Increasingly, people are engaged with virtual reality, virtual communication, and even virtual sex. Disembodied patterns of social media responses are called “friends”; even phone interactions now involve written messages more often than voices for many. What does all this mean for theological anthropology with its emphasis on the very corporeality that is being eclipsed in lives focused on electronic interactions and stimulation? Are we living our humanity to the fullest when electronic words and images mediate so much of our lives? What is the good human life today?

56. These ideas were explored in the panel on “Race, Gender, Animals, and Theology: Trouble at the Intersection” at the American Academy of Religion in Denver, Colorado (November 19, 2018).

57. Mary Jo Iozzio, “Norms Matter: A Hermeneutic of Disability—A Theological Anthropology of Radical Dependence,” *ET Studies* 4 (2013): 89–106.

58. For a more in-depth discussion of these issues, see Andrea Vicini and Agnes M. Brazal, “Longing for Transcendence: Cyborgs and Trans- and Posthumans,” *Theological Studies* 76 (2015): 148–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563914565308>.

Contextual: Persons in History and Culture

However we answer the above questions about the good human life, the theological anthropologies discussed thus far all presume that human beings exist as embodied beings in space and time. To be human is thus to be located in history, even when we ignore that history. Any adequate theological anthropology must then account for the fact that human life is not only corporeal but also contextual, as humans live within particular historical periods and are formed in their understandings of themselves, their lives, and their religion by their specific cultural-linguistic frameworks.

Like embodiment, the “historicity” of the human person receives considerable attention in early twentieth-century theological anthropology, as noted above. However, the treatment of historicity in this period remains as abstract as its treatment of embodiment. As Johann Baptist Metz notes, there is little discussion of the theological significance of real history, even by theologians who are preoccupied with historicity and who had just lived through the *tremendum* historical event of the Shoah. Despite their agreement that history is theologically significant as the locus of human life, they evince little interest in discerning what theological difference historical events actually make.

Metz emerges as one of the early leaders in redressing the lack of historical specificity in European theology. Concern for what Christian faith has to say after the horrors of the Shoah led Metz to reflect on the importance for theological anthropology of memory, in particular the memory of the dead and the victims of history.⁵⁹ Christian devotion to Jesus’s suffering death and resurrection, Metz argues, challenges Christians to remember and to hope for all of the other victims of history, such as the Jews killed at Auschwitz, who still await the promise of the resurrection. This memory-in-hope should form Christians to live in active and hopeful solidarity with history’s victims, resisting the further triumph the victors would achieve by erasing the memory of their victims. Metz also points out that remembering the dead is integral to sustaining a sense of the meaning of one’s own life since everyone will, after all, be among the dead one day. For Metz, a fully human life is one lived in memory of and hope for the dead, especially for the cut-off possibilities that only God can restore to history’s victims.

Liberation theologians in Latin America, along with black theologians in the United States, join in rejecting the abstract “historicity” that evades engagement with unjust suffering and with actual historical oppressions. James Cone, for example, has contributed an eloquent theological reflection on the memory of lynching in the United States, and M. Shawn Copeland builds on Metz’s work as she argues for remembering and resisting black suffering.⁶⁰ Latin American theologians have also criticized the earlier twentieth-century preoccupation with self-transcending freedom as inadequate to the situation of the destitute, whose exercise of freedom is significantly curtailed by

59. Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury, 1978).

60. James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011); and Copeland, *Enfleshing*, esp. 86, 120, 124.

desperate poverty and political oppression. As Gustavo Gutiérrez observes, the challenge in Latin America is not the nonbeliever but the nonperson, those (masses) suffering an ongoing economic and political oppression so severe that it mocks their humanity. Instead of marginalizing the poor as nonpersons who are as invisible and irrelevant in theology as they are to the privileged in society, good theology will imitate God's option for the poor.⁶¹ Rather than continuing to do their work as though only the world's elite count, theologians must ask what difference their work makes for the poor, marginalized, and devalued ones.

In Latin American, this shift from the nonbeliever to the nonperson has resulted in a focus on community—especially community with, by, and for the poor—as the locus for the development of full humanity. As José Ignacio González Faus describes the theological anthropology of Latin American liberation theology, to be fully human is to struggle for communities that reflect the triune, relational God who has opted for the poor and marginalized in history. These communities will thus be marked by “communion with diversity,” and by a “primacy of the weakest or least visible.”⁶² González Faus further argues for special concern for those who experience “the humiliation of despised otherness,” especially the indigenous and enslaved peoples whose humanity was denied in the conquest of Latin America and too often continues to be denied today.⁶³

Yet there is another dimension to human existence in space and time that requires consideration, and this is the role of culture in forming human personhood, a point taken most seriously in Latina theology. Latina experiences in the United States have clarified that, in addition to the oppressions of sex, including gender and sexual orientation, race, and economic injustice, human dignity is commonly attacked through the denigration of minority or marginalized cultures and ethnicities. Latina theology has responded by rejecting this devaluation of people on the basis of language and ethnicity, and also by exploring, and indeed celebrating, the richness of Latina culture as a theological resource.⁶⁴ In Latina theological anthropology, daily life (*lo cotidiano*) and relationships of family and friendship emerge as primary loci for the encounter with God and the experience of sin and grace.⁶⁵ As Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz has argued, the

61. Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Option for the Poor,” in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993); and Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973).

62. José Ignacio González Faus, “Anthropology: The Person and the Community,” in *Mysterium Liberationis*, 497–521 at 504.

63. “Anthropology: The Person and the Community,” 511.

64. See esp. Orlando O. Espín, “Introduction,” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 1–11.

65. Carmen N. Nanko-Fernández, “Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus,” in *Wiley Blackwell Companion*, 15–33; Orlando O. Espín, “An Exploration into the Theology of Sin and Grace,” in *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Systematic Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín and Miguel H. Díaz (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 121–52; and Díaz, *On Being Human*.

challenge of humanity is to create a “kin-dom” of mutual and supportive relationships in which personal and group distinctness is valued as a contribution to a greater whole.⁶⁶ While this involves a praxis of struggle against the many forms of oppression, Latino/a theology also accentuates beauty and fiesta, celebrations of life. True humanity, Latino/a theologians maintain, is to be found in communities that delight in the diversity of life.⁶⁷

Increasingly, theologies around the world are further challenging the adequacy of a Eurocentric and androcentric theological anthropology. To do justice to these contributions is beyond the scope of this article, which thus (alas) remains largely within the Euro-American-centered discourse that it criticizes. Still, it is important at least to mention that African, Asian, and Asian-American theologies join Latin American, Black, and Latinoa theologies in drawing attention to the importance of culture, of family (often including ancestors), and of community in the construction of personhood, so that full humanity is achieved only in mutually supportive relationships and communities.⁶⁸ Native American perspectives go further, emphasizing relationships with nonhuman beings.⁶⁹ Theologies around the globe are contributing to the revisioning of theological anthropology in resistance to Euro-American individualism as they celebrate the role of community in forming the person. As Miguel Díaz pithily summarizes the underlying insight, “Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres,” (tell me with whom you walk and I will tell you who you are).⁷⁰

Communal: Human Personhood as Relational

Our discussion thus far has largely proceeded as though sex, race, history, and culture could be treated as discrete topics. Of course, these aspects of human life cannot be separated, as the above conversation shows. Bodies are both sexual and racialized; gender and race are interpreted in and through cultural contexts reflecting historical power structures.

The impossibility of disentangling the various aspects of theological anthropology is especially evident with regard to the communality of the person. Each of the above

66. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

67. See also Virgil Elizondo, *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); and Roberto S. Goizueta, “Fiesta: Life in the Subjunctive,” in *From the Heart*, 84–99.

68. See for example Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001); Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996); Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2000); and Jonathan Y. Tan, *Introducing Asian-American Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008).

69. Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George E. “Tink” Tinker, *A Native American Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

70. Miguel H. Díaz, “Dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres: We Walk-with Our Lady of Charity,” in *From the Heart*, 153–71.

contributions, whether focused primarily on embodiment or on contextuality, has included reflections on the person as inherently relational, as oriented to community. In rejecting theological assumptions that treat the privileged (white) European or Euro-American male as the normative human person, these theologies have defended the importance to human flourishing of healthy and just community relationships. In their different voices, each of the above theological trajectories has challenged what has been aptly called “the demonic individualism” of contemporary Western culture.⁷¹

This focus on the person’s fulfillment in community is found not only in theological anthropology, of course, but also in contemporary theological reflections about the church and, ultimately, about God. There is a growing ecumenical consensus around the idea that the church is called to witness to and to work for the eschatological goal of the communion of all in God. Rooted in the Orthodox theology of *theosis*, this goal of divine–human communion is central to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, affirmed by the World Council of Churches, and integral to theologies as different as those of John Milbank and Miroslav Volf.⁷² The theological significance of human relationality is also developed in the renewed attention to the doctrine of the Trinity, especially insofar as the God in whose image humans are made is better imaged as a communion of self-giving love than as a solitary reality.⁷³

Pope Francis’s 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si’* has further expanded official ecclesial understandings of human relationality by emphasizing the role of nature in the community for which we are made. Articulating a position more consistent with biblical perspectives on humanity’s place in creation, Pope Francis has declared that human existence unfolds through interwoven relationships with nature, with God, and with other humans.⁷⁴ Francis further condemns the “tyrannical anthropocentrism” that considers human beings alone to have intrinsic value.⁷⁵ Refusing to underscore human dignity by devaluing the rest of creation, Francis thus joins ecofeminists and others who argue that humans thrive in cooperation with, not in opposition to, the natural world.

71. Hopkins, *Being Human*, 5.

72. *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 42, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html; Marie-Dominique Chenu, “The New Awareness of the Trinitarian Basis of the Church,” in “Where Does the Church Stand?” Giuseppe Alberigo and Gustavo Gutiérrez, eds. *Concilium* 146 (1981): 14–21; Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2012), esp. 1–2, 5; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 422–32; Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper no. 214 (Geneva: World Council of Churches Publications, 2013), 15.

73. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

74. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’* (May 14, 2015), 66, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html (hereafter cited as *LS*).

75. *LS* 68.

The community of life in which humanity flourishes is thus envisioned as a community in diversity, including diverse life forms; that is, the goal is unity, not uniformity. This principle is affirmed in the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, even if the implications are not fully developed in those documents. Unity-in-diversity is also, as Copeland reminds us, implied in the belief that humans are made in the image of the triune God, whose oneness incorporates difference.

Because the goal of human life is thus a communion enriched by diversity, it is imperative that the particularities of human corporeal and contextual existence not be ignored or effaced. To discuss embodiment without race and gender, or historicity without the particularities of events and cultures, contradicts the claim that diversity is central to the divine intention. Furthermore, when theological anthropology proceeds as though androcentric and Eurocentric experiences are sufficient to understand human reality, those who are not among the white, male, Euro-American elite are devalued. With a theological anthropology so inadequate to the communion that the church preaches, perhaps it is not surprising that the churches in the United States have mustered so little resistance to consumerist individualism.

Of course, it is no easy task to create diverse communities marked by mutuality and equality. It takes time, work, and real risk to be vulnerable to and with others in the struggle for more inclusive and just communities. There is always the danger that we may lose ourselves in seeking community with others or that we lose community with others in seeking to defend our own identities. Yet, as Saracino reminds us, "In a world that seems to be losing sight of . . . the implications of difference through both the processes of globalization and social narcissism, Christians are called to bear witness to borders, not with fear, entitlement, or numbness, but with an embrace of the creative conflict and the affective ambiguity they bring."⁷⁶

Conclusion: Returning to Sin and Grace

The difficulty of forming inclusive and mutual communities brings this conversation back to the topics of sin and grace that have long been central to theological anthropology. The depth of human sin—and the need for the healing and transforming power of grace—are evident in painful personal as well as societal failures to establish even minimal justice, let alone truly mutual communities. Deepening theological anthropology through more specific reflections on human corporeality, contextuality, and communality is essential to the Christian envisioning of the more just and diverse communities that beckon. Yet without sufficient attention to sin and grace, these conversations will fail to provide a sustaining spirituality of resistance and transformation.⁷⁷

As Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out long ago, an adequate theology of sin and grace provides the necessary basis for just social institutions that protect against

76. Saracino, *Being about Borders*, 47.


77. Orlando Espín models this engagement with his development of the theology of sin and grace from the perspective of Latina experience. See his "An Exploration into the Theology of Sin and Grace," in *From the Heart*, 121–52.

unchecked power. This remains a lacuna in official Catholic social teachings and in Catholic ecclesiology, as the ongoing sex abuse crisis makes all too clear. The Catholic Church simply does not have institutional structures to check the abuse of ecclesial power. Neglect of the dialectic of sin and grace also seems to be implicated in the vicious dualism of American public life, which so casually divides the world into good people who make only minor mistakes and moral monsters who have forfeited any right to be treated as human. As Virgilio Elizondo once observed, “in America, all is permitted, but nothing is forgiven.”⁷⁸

Indeed, it is arguable that to prescind from discussions of sin and grace reinforces individualism. Without sin, what need is there for the church—or even for God? The Christian tradition has long proclaimed repentance for the forgiveness of sins to be good news; knowing one’s own personal sin, and not only the sins institutionalized in unjust social structures, is a grace that reveals one’s need for God.

What then is it to be human, really? The past century of Christian theological anthropology has agreed that being embodied in space and time, formed by historical and cultural contexts, and oriented to communion within God is integral to human personhood. Taking seriously the corporeality, contextuality, and communality of the human person has enriched theology with reflections on the specific perspectives and contributions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation, race, class, position in history, culture, and ethnicity. Assumptions about the ability of the experience of elite white males to represent the universal human condition have been rightly challenged as distortions that deny the full humanity of all others. The rich variety of theologies must continue, including diverse perspectives on the Christian tradition’s spiritual wisdom about the sin and grace evident in all our lives.⁷⁹

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78. Alas, I have no reference, as this was one of the many wise things Virgilio Elizondo was apt to say in personal conversations.

79. I am grateful to Christopher Carter, Orlando Espín, Karen Teel, and Michele Watkins for conversations in the process of writing this article, and to Susie Paulik Babka for her continual reminder of the centrality of beauty and vulnerability to all thought about divine reality. I would also like to express my gratitude to Paul Crowley and to the anonymous reviewers for their insightful suggestions.