Believers and the Beloved: Some Notes on Norris's Christology

Eugene F. Rogers, Jr.

In Richard Norris's first book, *God and World in Early Christian Theology*,[1] the Incarnation deepens accounts of God's transcendence. Did transcendence trap God beyond the world? Or did the Incarnation leave Jesus less than God? In Irenaeus Norris glimpsed an answer: God so transcended the world as to draw nearer to it than it was to itself. "What makes God *different* from every creature . . . is . . . precisely what assures his direct and intimate *relation* with every creature" (pp. 84–86). God could take on flesh and history from deep inside them, more interior than they were to themselves. Biblical metaphors for this principle are anything but coy. "Neither is there any creature that is not manifest, in his sight, but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4:13, AV). "Wisdom in justice envelopes and penetrates all things" (Wis. 7:24). Norris leaves these uncited, preferring Christology to prooftexts. Can Norris's Christology also deepen accounts of sexuality and gender?

The topic of Norris's first book remains that of his last "Notes." In how many and various ways can God take on flesh? Can God orient (homo)sexual inclinations to God? Can God do a new thing in the history of God's people? Imagine another section for the "Notes." Call it Section I, for the Incarnation. The Incarnation brings Norris's authorship—beginning, middle, and end—to focus on the topic of the "Notes." In God's uplifting of humanity, Christian traditions have usually found cross-sex desire something God can use, properly purified, in marriage and in monasticism. Does the same go for same-sex desire? Can God use it? Or does it have to be, not purified, but simply cured?

[1] New York: The Seabury Press, 1965. Kathryn Tanner has extended Norris's insight in *God and Creation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1988) and *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity* (Edinburgh and Minneapolis, Minn.: T&T Clark and Fortress Press, 2002).

The Incarnation raises issues of flesh and history again in Norris's edition of patristic texts, *The Christological Controversy*.[2] I once told him I read aloud from his introduction every year to a systematics class. I called it the best paragraph he ever wrote. He chuckled and remarked that "the writing of monographs is a grave mistake"—not that one shouldn't write monographs, but an author might enjoy more influence and even profit from a book that students as well as scholars would read. This is the passage:

> Jesus Christ is "one hypostasis" but "in two natures," that is, he is a single reality, the divine Logos, existing as such, and at the same time existing as a human being. This formula, the final product of the classical christological controversies, is essentially a rule of christological language. Its terms are not calculated to picture the way in which Jesus is put together. Rather, they are calculated to explain how it is proper to speak of him. Orthodoxy consists in the acknowledgment that Jesus is one subject, who is properly spoken of both as God—the divine Logos—and as a human being. To give an account of Jesus, then, one must talk in two ways simultaneously. One must account for all that he is and does by reference to the Logos of God, that is, one must identify him as God acting in our midst. At the same time, one must account for him as a human being in the ordinary sense of that term. Both accounts are necessary. One cannot understand Jesus correctly by taking either account independently, even while recognizing that they really are different accounts. There is a sense, therefore, in which it is true that the Council of Chalcedon solves the christological problem by laying out its terms. Its formula dictates not a Christology but formal outlines of an adequate christological language. (pp. 30–31)

If Norris found a language adequate to true humanity and its destiny in Christology, he could hardly find it inadequate in sexuality. What role does sexuality play in true humanity and its divinization? for the *logoi* in the Logos? in the development of the church? Those pose proper, if anachronistic, questions in Christology. To deny them narrows the scope of God's humanity and blunts the depth of God's transcendence. The questions of Norris's "Notes" renew and enlarge those of the christological controversy. The sexuality debates, too, must give a twofold account of the savior. They too must speak of Christ as God, and therefore as beyond gender, as its source and goal. They too must

[2] Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1980.

speak of Christ as a human being, and therefore one who assumes and redeems human sexual nature.

Norris's mid-career article "The Ordination of Women and the 'Maleness' of Christ"[3] had already treated gender as a topic in Christology. You might remember it: God becomes *anthropos,* not *aner,* human, not male; so that both genders express the humanity of God. But it's not quite that simple. Norris's twofold account of the savior forbids him to pose the question gender-free. His formulation retains gender precisely to examine its significance. In italics, Norris asks, *"Is the relation of a female to Jesus as the Christ essentially different from the relation of a male to Jesus as the Christ?"* (p. 76). He answers "No." In that formulation, the genders of Jesus and the ordinands neither dictate nor disappear. The bodies of both Jesus and believers continue to matter, as the matter that has called forth the question, even when they cease to determine the answer. *Jesus'* maleness—just because it is *God's*, and infinitely more than a man's—cannot be confined.

Like monastic commentaries on the Song of Songs, Norris's way meditates on the gender of Jesus so as neither to diminish nor circumscribe God's humanity. Norris's way also refuses to dismiss or confine the ability of creaturely genders to express God's infinity. One could so pose the relation of Christ to the creature as to universalize the particular away, but Norris rules that out. Rather, Norris describes his formulation as "the form—and in principle the only form—which the question of 'equality of the sexes' takes in the context of Christian existence (i.e., of existence 'in Christ'); and it is the same, in the last resort, as the question . . . of the denotation of 'us' in the expression 'God-with-us.' " That form respects *The Christological Controversy*'s twofold account of the savior.

But just how can Norris refuse to eliminate the terms "male" and "female" from Christ or believer precisely while denying their significance for ordination? To apply from elsewhere some words of Judith Butler, Norris's task

> is not to negate or refuse either term . . . [but] to continue to use them, to repeat them, to repeat them subversively, and to displace them from contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power. Here it is of course necessary to state quite plainly that the options . . . are not exhausted by *presuming*

[3] *Anglican Theological Review,* Supplementary Series 6 (1976): 69–80, reprinted "with minor revisions" in *The Feminine in the Church,* ed. Monica Furlong (London: SPCK, 1984), 71–85.

> [say, maleness] on the one hand, and *negating* it, on the other. It is [Norris's] purpose to do precisely neither of these. [Norris's procedure] does not freeze, banish, render useless, or deplete of meaning the usage of the term; on the contrary, it provides the conditions to *mobilize* the signifier in the service of an alternative production.[4]

So Christ mobilizes his death to produce the matter of the Eucharist. So Norris continues and repeats the language of "femaleness" and "maleness" just to displace them from contexts of oppressive power; he refuses to banish them from the form of his argument or his question, to render them useless, or deplete them of meaning, but mobilizes them for an alternative production, "a ministry more fully expressive of the Christ it represents" (p. 79). This procedure also opens up the issue of "Notes." That work too treats the genders of the believer and the Beloved. It too treats genders as ineliminable if various accidents.[5] As Norris discovered in Irenaeus, believers should neither reduce God to a gender nor refuse God's humanity to women or men. God neither denies himself a gender as incarnate nor confines himself to a gender as God.

Norris's question applies to the current case if Christ calls the Christian to unite with him in love. Christ comes as the Bridegroom to women and (in Symeon the New Theologian) to men; Christ suckles the believer (in Cistercian piety), male and female.[6] The gender of Jesus does not confine the body of Christ: it is male in Jesus and female in the church.[7] Nor does the gender of the believer hinder Christ: male and female, Christ can draw them: Christ can be all to all. In Christ there is "no 'male and female'": no final, compulsory, or exhaustive ending of one in the other, but in the Christ who satisfies the

---

[4] "Contingent Foundations," in Seyla Benhabib, et al., *Feminist Contentions* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 1995), 35–57; here, 51–52, paragraphs run together.

[5] Not necessarily as binary categories. Precisely because the disjunctive "or" is missing from the "male and female" of Gen. 1:27 and Gal. 3:28, the way lies open to treat them as ends of a spectrum, parameters around a large variety, or clusters of Wittgensteinian family resemblances. Norris's article mentions neuter and androgynous images for God as well as male and female ones—denying that any can "domesticate the Almighty" (76).

[6] Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022), Tenth Ethical Discourse in *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses,* trans. Alexander Golitizin, 3 vols. (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995–1997). For commentary see Derek Krueger, "Homoerotic Spectacle and the Monastic Body in Symeon the New Theologian," *Toward a Theology of Eros*, ed. Virginia Burrus (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 99–118. See also Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1982).

[7] I owe this to Gerard Loughlin.

desire of every living thing. Christ, as God, transcends gender, not as neither, but as source and goal of all. Christ attracts—or orients—all desire to God.

Wait, says the critic: love for Christ has nothing to do with sexually oriented eros. Well, that question stands out among the last Norris took up in print.

In his final book, *The Song of Songs: Interpreted by Early Christian and Medieval Commentators,*[8] Norris treats traditional exegesis about love and desire, sexual and divine. He lets Origen's words open his own:

> Here . . . and in many other passages, you will find that the divine Scripture shunned the term "desire" and instead set down "delight" and "love." Nevertheless, now and then, though rarely, it calls desire by its proper name. . . . [I]n the little book now before us, the word "desire" has been changed to the term "love" in the passage . . . "tell him that I am wounded by love" (5:8)—instead of the possible alternative: "I have been struck by the dart of desire."
>
> Thus in the divine Scriptures it makes no difference whether it says "desire" or "love" or "delight." . . .
>
> Hence too our Savior became a neighbor to us. He did not pass us by while we were lying half-dead from wounds inflicted by thieves. So it must be understood that love directed to God is always moving toward God, from whom it takes its origin; and it has regard for its neighbor, to whom it is akin as being similarly created in incorruption. Thus, then, take whatever is written concerning love as if it had been said about desire, and do not worry about labels; for the same sense is manifest in both of them. (pp. 6–7)

So Norris ends the reading from Origen—with a line that for simplicity and sweep retains the power to shock. Origen treats neighbor-love as no alternative to the love of desire, nor subsumes desire under it as some lesser form. Rather, Origen concludes that neighbor-love shares desire's mark of tending toward the Beloved. Far from taking the Incarnation and the parable of the Good Samaritan as reasons to substitute "love" for "desire," Origen—as Norris translates and showcases him—does the opposite: he takes the Incarnation and the Samaritan as cause to read "desire" for "love." To do otherwise cuts the believer out of the embodied *movement,* from and toward the Beloved, in which creatures live and have their being. To do otherwise misidentifies God's

[8] Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003.

transcendence as bypassing rather than taking up the movements of the creature. To do otherwise disparages God's desire for *us*.

From there we can end Section I as Norris ended "The 'Maleness' of the Christ": "On these grounds, it must be concluded not merely that the objection . . . fails as an argument, but that the premises which apparently ground it imply a false and dangerous understanding of the mystery of redemption—one which, if carried to its logical conclusion, would effectively deny the reality of Christ as the one in whom all things are 'summed up'" (Eph. 1:10, p. 79).

This is so for the reason that opened Norris's authorship: "What makes God *different* from every creature is precisely what assures his direct and intimate *relation* with every creature." This is even so, the "Notes" imply, for homosexual creatures. Precisely as the "desire of nations," Christ is the desire of Gentiles, those whom Paul tarred with same-sex desire. As the object of desire, the body of Christ neither abandons the maleness of Jesus, nor denies it to men; as the suckler of believers, the body of Christ neither cuts off the breasts of the church, nor denies them to women. *Para phusin* is the term that Paul notoriously uses in Romans 1:26 for direct and intimate relations among Gentiles of the same sex—*and* that he repeats in Romans 11:24 to describe what makes the God of Israel shockingly different from creaturely expectation in saving those same Gentiles. *Para phusin* is the term that Paul does not banish but continues to use; to repeat subversively; to displace from contexts—where as an anti-Gentile ethnic stereotype[9]—a rival teacher has deployed it as an instrument of oppressive power; it is the term Paul has mobilized for an alternative production.[10] To save Gentiles, God initiates direct and intimate relations even with Gentile excess. What makes God *para phusin,* exceed nature, also assures God's "direct and intimate relation"—in Song of Songs commentaries, Christ's erotic or paraphysical relation—with every creature. Neither the gender of the believer nor of Christ the Beloved makes any difference, but Christ mobilizes difference to become the lover of all.[11]

---

[9] Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1994), 94.

[10] Romanos the Melodist makes the Virgin Birth the paradigm of the *para phusin*. See my *After the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 87–89, 98–104.

[11] For same-sex marriage as one ascetic practice (alongside monasticism) that love of Christ can take for those called to it, see my *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way Into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999); "Marriage as an Ascetic Practice," *INTAMS Review, The Journal of the International Academy of Marital Spirituality* 11 (2005): 28–36; or "Sanctified Unions," *The Christian Century* 121, no. 12 (June 15, 2004): 26–29.