

Gender Trouble – A Sign of the Times

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We Want Sex – this film about the trade unionists at Ford Dagenham in the 1960s makes clear the importance of the gender debates for the working world. “Equal pay for equal work” – this notion was initially unthinkable for the female protagonist of the film. Courage and persistence, support from several sides, and a moment of inspiration were needed to bring the unthinkable into the area of actual possibility. From this moment of inspiration on, the initiative of the women acquires an unexpected effectiveness that leads to the joint involvement of the seamstress Rita O’Grady and the politician Barbara Castle in setting a milestone in the Equal Pay Act.

The film is to be highly recommended. Also, the German title¹ cleverly refers to the multidimensionality of the problem that is inherent to the gender debate. A banner that the Ford women held up during a protest displayed the slogan “We want sex equality.” The title was created from the misunderstanding that the slogan gave rise to. It plays with that ambiguity of the word “sex,” which leads to confusion in German-speaking areas as well. Thus, the slogan “We want sex equality“ opens up a wider horizon of questions that are the topics of debate today in Church and society, including the question of the relation of sexuality and power. That this question is debated so heatedly, passionately, and controversially indicates that a radical change is taking place. Some people welcome this change emphatically, while others want to block it unconditionally. Thus, it comes down to what the American philosopher Judith Butler calls “gender trouble.”² Is this trouble a sign of our times? If so, theology and the Church have special relevance. But what is that relevance?

There has probably been constant movement in the life patterns, ascription of roles and identities of and for women and men throughout human history. But the fact that the current upheavals are so general and multi-layered makes this gender trouble thoroughly unique. It is characteristic of our time that the gender issue is very much alive in the various areas of life – personally and politically, socially and religiously, scientifically and culturally. Fixed roles are tottering, gender boundaries are being transgressed, challenged, and crossed in the private sphere of love and family relationships; in the working world where women not only want equal pay for equal work but also want a career; and in politics where the concern is the distribution of public funds and giving direction to culture. Women are even filling leadership positions in classical institutions that were all-male organizations for a long time.

¹ The original English title is *Made in Dagenham*.

² Butler, Judith: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge: New York 1990. (German: *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter*. Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a.M. 1991). The German title *Das Unbehagen der Geschlechter* (The Anxiety of Gender) lacks the pithiness of the English title.

These changes can possibly become tectonic shifts because of the global media presence and cyberspace. They also make those who still live in strictly patriarchally organized societies aware of alternative patterns of life. On the internet, people do not have to present themselves in their biological sex but can transgress set boundaries in a playful way. For young women who do not want to be held to either old roles or feminist ascriptions, this appears to be especially fascinating. The sociologist Manuel Castells therefore says, in his trilogy on the information age, that the radical changes in gender issues is “the most important revolution” of the new millennium “because it goes to the root of society and to the heart of what we are.”³ He also reminds us that women must deal with bitter setbacks. This became reality in 2016, when the new American president attempted to make the abuse of women politically acceptable again in his campaign and in politics. The conflicts will get worse.

Already in 1963, in his encyclical *Pacem in terris*, Pope John XXIII called the women’s movement a sign of the times: women were resisting being treated in “a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument.” The Church has always opposed such violations of the dignity of women. This still obtains today, when the worldwide profits from trafficking in women and forced prostitution are higher than those from the drug trade. At the same time, it is no longer exclusively concerns women today – a good fifty years after this encyclical. Men have come more prominently into view, even if they only participate selectively in gender studies. In addition, the range of pending questions and issues is increasing considerably.

When speaking of the “signs of the times,” it is a question of recognizing what new strategic course changes in significant events can be implemented that are relevant for the future. Signs of the times steer our attention to those changes that are characteristic of this time and thus “distinguish” the present from other times. Such changes do not occur, however, without conflicts. To the contrary, continuous social conflicts are a marker of the signs of the time.

Gender trouble is such a sign of our times. It leads to heated debates and sharp discussions – in connection with “New Year’s Eve 2015 in Cologne”; in the conflict over headscarves for Muslim women; the so-called “honour killings” by Muslim men; every year anew on Christopher Street Day; when the biology lesson in a new curriculum leads to demonstrations in Baden-Württemberg or result in a heated discussion on a famous talk show. Gender questions acquire a special explosiveness when they conjoin with other signs of the times, such as those we see now in migration discourse.

We should situate the Gospel and allow it to be heard wherever deeply radical changes are occurring. As is well known, the Church is charged with the constant “duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel” (GS 4). This interpretation

³ Castells, Manuel: *Das Informationszeitalter*. Band 2: *Die Macht der Identität*. Leverkusen 2002, 148.

is, however, highly disputable, as shown by the controversial internal debates in the Church on gender issues. What does the Catholic Church have that can contribute to resolving the conflicts gender trouble is characterized? Three perspectives are presented below.

1. Sex and Gender: Distinguish between Them But Do Not Separate Them!

Scientific research on “gender” has pushed on with distinguishing between “sex” and “gender.” “Sex” is the English term for one’s *biological* sex, which is determined by chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy. There are people, however, in whom these three factors of chromosomes, hormones, and anatomy are not in harmony with each other. Despite a clear chromosome set, these people cannot be placed in one of the two sexes – they have the physical characteristics of both. Here we can speak of intersexuality. “Gender” is the English term for social gender, thus the social, cultural, and political determination of gender difference, and thus gender roles. It is related to the expectations of society with respect to the “typical” relationship between women and men and to the latitude for action that opens up a society to people with respect to, for example, clothing and outfits, choice of profession, and activities in academics, culture, and politics.

But how are sex and gender related? The problem is that this cannot be described in positive terms. But one can, however, cite two mistakes that are to be avoided in the discussion on the relation between sex and gender.

- The first mistake consists in confusing sex and gender. This mistake is made by people who argue against there being anything like gender at all. They assert that only one’s biological sex determines whether one is a man or a woman and establishes gender roles.
- The second mistake consists in separating sex from gender. This mistake is made by people who presuppose that gender roles can be changed without any reference to the biological sex. Gender roles can then be changed at will.

In the issue of “sex and gender” one can, so to speak, come down on one of two sides: either one downplays the physical, the biological, and thus sex, or one downplays the cultural, thus gender. Those are the pitfalls we should avoid. This is why the Catholic position points out that sex and gender must be distinguished but not separated. Pope Francis recently referred to this in *Amoris Laetitia*. Unfortunately, this point has been almost lost to view in the broad discussion of the new exhortation. It reads:

It needs to be emphasized that “biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.” (AL 56.)⁴

⁴ Pope Francis here cites the German language group of the Roman family synod of 2015.

For the first time, the distinction between sex and gender was taken up in a papal exhortation and approached positively. Indeed, sex and gender can be distinguished. Attempts to demonize speaking of “gender” in general are therefore rejected. At the same time sex and gender cannot be separated from each other.

- Thus, one cannot say: *We’ll just let everything cultural (gender) go, and then we will be left with only nature (sex), and whatever nature indicates is the way it is!* That would be a separation, which is not possible. Sex, one’s biological nature – genetically, anatomically, hormonally – is always culturally stamped and cannot develop without culture.
- But gender identity and gender roles do not develop independently of biological realities either. “Sex and gender” are related to each other without being dissolved into each other. They are *embodied* – inconfusedly and inseparably.

For objective reasons, Pope Francis arrived at a similar position as the gender flyer “Gender-Sensitive: Gender from a Catholic Point of View,” that the Offices for Female and Male Spiritual Care of the German Bishops’ Conference jointly published on 21 October 2015. There we read: “The Catholic position holds that sex and gender must be distinguished but not separated. They are related to each other, without being dissolved into each other.” (3rd column).

“Distinguish between but do not separate” – this formula goes back to the Council of Chalcedon, where the question of how the two natures of Jesus Christ are related was to be settled. This relation cannot be stated in positive terms. The fundamental theologian Gregor Maria Hoff points out that this problem only allows a negative formulation⁵: “inconfusedly” and “inseparably.” The major advance here lies in the fact that the words “inconfusedly” and “inseparably” allow both the recognition and thus avoidance of possible errors in the Christological expressions.

The language “inconfusedly” and “inseparably,” which stem from the development of Christological dogma, can be applied by analogy to the relation between sex and gender. This language solves the problem by respecting the impossibility of any positive assertion and at the same time states very clearly what errors are to be avoided.

2. Gender-Sensitive Activity: The Debate Has Been Reopened

The language “distinguish between but do not separate” answers a question that is actually posed in the gender debates, namely, that of the relationship between sex and gender. It would be exciting to discuss this with Judith Butler – she gave the gender debate a decisive impulse and expressly pointed out that there is no biological gender without any cultural influence. But

⁵ Hoff, Gregor Maria 1995: “Chalcedon im Paradigma Negativer Theologie: Zur aporetischen Wahrnehmung der chalcedonensichen Christologie.” In: *ThPh* 10 (1995), 355-372.

she does not have the early church's magnificent language of "inconfusedly" and "inseparably" at her disposal. One could say that Butler lacks Chalcedon.

Pope Francis' position opens up the gender debate anew from the Catholic side. It allows the possibility of introducing resources from the history of theology into gender studies. In this context, the catchword "gender-sensitive" is a key term, for the German term *Geschlecht* covers both sex and gender. Both are included in the turbulence of gender trouble. The future task of Church and society is to be gender-sensitive on all levels. specific perspectives from men and women need to be perceived, to be brought into discussion with each other, and other options for action in the light of the Gospel need to be researched. To live the Gospel, the Church needs an active regard for women and men that can be discernible in its speech and actions. One guiding principle for gender-sensitive activity reads; Distinguish between the sexes but do not let that be the basis for making determinations (Angela Kaupp).

The debate in theology and gender studies is just beginning. New perspectives are being developed in biology that will perhaps be pioneering for Christian anthropology.⁶ It is important to first understand the results for gender studies, to read the texts, to deal with the results. The discussion on whether there are other sexes besides male and female, whether there are intersexual and transsexual people is a very heated one. It is indisputable, however, that "woman" and "man" are concepts that attempt to give order to a very complex reality. Concrete reality is more heterogenous than what is expressed in these two concepts. That also obtains for biological sex – that much is shown simply by the existence of intersexual people. Is a human being less of a woman or less of a man when those hormones change with age? Is a man no longer a man when his testosterone level sinks below the normal level? Women are different, and so are men.

In his exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis criticizes a gender ideology that "denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman" (AL 56). Ideologies are not helpful; critique is necessary, and caution is advisable. Pope Francis did not say that gender is "demonic." Unfortunately, this rumour circulated on some internet platforms and in social media. But it is simply wrong. Citations from the pope are subject to one strict rule: a pope is not to be quoted via what others say he has said but exclusively by what he himself actually said. To know what he did say, one should not look at kath.net, which is rife with rumours, but at vatican.va where Pope Francis can be read in the original language.

In his exhortation, Pope Francis describes elsewhere what "gender" means, without referring to it explicitly: "Nor can we ignore the fact that the configuration of our own mode of being, whether as male or female, is not simply the result of biological or genetic factors, but of multiple elements having to do with temperament, family history, culture, experience,

⁶ Cf., for example, the research by Kerstin Palm at Humboldt University in Berlin.

education, the influence of friends, family members and respected persons, as well as other formative situations. It is true that we cannot separate the masculine and the feminine from God's work of creation, which is prior to all our decisions and experiences, and where biological elements exist which are impossible to ignore. But it is also true that masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories" (AL 286).

3. Mercy and the Vulnerability of the Other: What Gender Trouble Needs

In an era of gender trouble, the social vulnerability of the genders is very high. Anyone working in this field has to deal constantly with injuries and vulnerability. In Church and society, discussions are conducted partly in a heated, unfair, and almost relentless way. Positions are therefore accompanied by concrete threats and personal defamations. Homosexual people cannot move in the public space without fear of harm when they defend their homosexuality but must contend with verbal and physical attacks. But the effects of "trouble" can also be detected even when weapons are not used. Thus, couples with children are entangled everyday in personal struggles when they want to reconcile family life and careers.

What can the Catholic Church bring into this turbulence? Without a doubt, it is important to contribute to the objectification of the debate and to counter unfairness, defamation, and violence. But it could and should provide even more because, right from the start, injury and suffering have belonged to the core themes of Christianity, at the centre of which is the Crucified. In the 20th century, in discussion with Auschwitz and its own history of guilt, theology learned to look in a special way at those injuries that are inflicted on others. With a view to the turbulent gender debates, we are presented with the possibility today of developing this sensitivity not only for injuries already suffered but also for vulnerabilities and of introducing this sensitivity into social conflict.

Injuries are dangerous because they involve pain, because they limit life, or even kill it. But the danger goes far beyond the injuries themselves. Vulnerability can already be detected in conflicts, and the attempt is made to shield oneself from it. In that vulnerability, it thus concerns not only injuries already suffered but also injuries that could occur in the future. To protect oneself from such vulnerability and to make oneself invulnerable, one is prepared to injure others. Family conflicts become caught in a spiral of violence when the participants recognize the vulnerability of others all too well and target precisely that. Deadly family dramas show the unprecedented power of vulnerability. In the New Testament, Herod represents this strategy of hurting others rather than being hurt himself.

Christology opens up the possibility of dealing in a completely different way with one's own vulnerability and that of others in everyday gender conflicts: God has become human in Jesus Christ out of love for people – a child in a manger, poor and vulnerable. God thus voluntarily exposes himself to human vulnerability. Nothing makes the human being so vulnerable as love

because in love weapons are laid down, walls and barriers dismantled. Whoever wants to protect others in their vulnerability, surrenders to the vulnerability that love entails. Here one runs the risk of being injured oneself – that is what makes conflicts between couples so painful. If one shrinks back from the risk, one cannot experience the love. Christology encourages making oneself vulnerable for the sake of love, even in the event of possible failure. It is precisely where love attempts to perceive the vulnerability of others and to protect them in that vulnerability that love has a chance.

This other way of dealing with vulnerability does not obtain only for love relationships in the narrow sense of the term. It applies everywhere where people treat each other cruelly and thus call for mercy. Mercy⁷ means that one sees not only one's own injuries and vulnerabilities but is also prepared to first perceive that of others – and to act in such a way so that the unheard of power of vulnerability is overcome. If the Church involves itself in society in this way, it will establish peace where violence threatens. The Church cannot stay out of the danger zone of vulnerability that gender trouble creates. Rather, it has the opportunity here to situate the voice of the Gospel and to provide peace in the coexistence of women and men, to give the coexistence of people a chance.

⁷ On this, cf. the theme issue of mercy of the *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie*, and the contribution by H. Keul 2016: "Hingabe wagen – barmherzig handeln. Eine Antwort auf die Vulnerabilität der Anderen." In: *ZKTh* 2016. For theological research into vulnerability, cf. www.verwundbarkeiten.de