Women in Creation, Fall and Redemption: The Classical Paradigm

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The classical Western Christian theological paradigm for interpreting gender, male and female, in relation to creation, fall and redemption was developed by St. Augustine in the late 4th - early 5th centuries. Augustine originally followed the views taught by the Greek Church Fathers, such as Origen and Gregory Nyssa. According to the Greek view humanity was originally created in immortal incorporeal unity without gender differentiation. Gender difference was added by God only in relation to sin or the fall which brought mortality and hence the need for sexual reproduction to perpetuate the human species.

But his study of Genesis caused Augustine to revise this Platonic approach to human creation. He asserted that Adam and Eve were created from the beginning with real physical and sexually differentiated bodies. Creation as male and female, sexual intercourse and reproduction would have been part of God’s original created design and not simply characteristics that appeared after sin and as a remedy for mortality. God first created a non-gendered intellectual essence of humanity in the image of God found equally in all humans, male and female. But in the actual production of humans, the male was created first and then the female from his side to indicate the relation of superiority of male and the subordination of the female by which they are to relate to each other in the social order. For Augustine then gender hierarchy was part of the original creation, it did not just appear after the fall into sin.

For Augustine, Adam and Eve originally would not have died, not because their bodies were not mortal, but because their bodies were so united with their souls in union with God that death would have been prevented. They would have had sexual intercourse and produced physical offspring. But this original sexual intercourse would have been completely free of “concupiscence” or sexual lust. In Augustine’s words, Adam would have performed sex as a rational act completely under the control of his mind, as a farmer sows a seed in a field. Eve would have remained virginal in this intercourse and subsequent parturition, just as Mary remained virginal in her impregnation by God and the birth of Jesus.

But this lust free insemination and birth of offspring never actually happened, because the creation of Eve was followed immediately by the fall of Adam and Eve into sin. Eve took the
initiative in this choice to disobey God, because as a woman she had less rationality and was closer to the bodily lower self and so was easily deceived by the tempting serpent. Adam, in Augustine’s view, was not deceived but went along with Eve in an act of kindly companionship lest she be left alone outside of Paradise. It is Adam’s consent that was decisive for the fall into sin, for he represents the higher self or intellect. Adam and Eve are both culpable, but in different ways. Adam’s sin lies in losing his male rank by obeying his wife or his lower self, rather that making her to obey him as her “head.”

Although Augustine claims that both male and female possess the intellectual soul or “Image of God,” women in their femaleness are treated as inferior and unable to represent this image of God in herself. As Augustine puts it in his treatise on the Trinity, interpreting Paul’s statement in I Corinthians 11:7 that the man is the “Image and glory of God, while the woman is the glory of man,” “separately in her quality as a helpmeet, which regards the woman alone, then she is not the image of God, but as regards the man alone, he is the image of God as fully and completely as when the women too is joined with him as one.” We see here an ambivalence in Augustine’s view of the image of God in women, for although she has it as a non-gendered intellectual soul, and so can be baptized and redeemed, she cannot represent it as woman in her social roles in society, where she images the lower self or body.

In the Fall humans lost their original preservation from death and freedom of the will to obey God. They were plunged into sin and death that was manifest in a profound dislocation of mind, will and desires. No longer did their bodily parts and will obey their rational intellect, but rather the fallen human (male?) experiences, in Paul’s words, “a war between the law in the members that wars against the law in the mind.” For Augustine this war is found particularly in sexual intercourse, where the sexual act cannot be carried out without concupiscent ejaculation which is intrinsically sinful and polluting. For Augustine this means every sexual act, even within marriage and for the sole purpose of procreation, is inherently sinful and is the means by which original sin is transmitted from father to son. How women experience this is never discussed.

For Augustine, in their fallen condition humans also lost their original free will. No longer are they able to obey God as a free act of the will, but rather they are entrapped in egoism and self-will. Only divine acts of grace beyond fallen human nature can break this bondage of the will and force the alienated person to obey God rather than self. This view drives Augustine’s teachings on
limited election and predestination. Since God knew that humans would sin, from all eternity He elected a limited number of human beings to receive the grace to choose God rather than self and to persevere in this choice. Since all humans are fallen and deserve eternal damnation, this is a purely gratuitous choice by God, not based on any initial moral superiority of the chosen. God chooses some to receive grace and leaves the rest – the vast majority of humans – to their deserved damnation. This Augustinian teaching of bondage of the will, limited election and double predestination is a decisive departure from earlier and Eastern Christian teachings which affirmed human freedom of the will as the key to both human fall into sin, and also human freedom, rooted in the divine image, to turn back to God and be redeemed.

For Augustine (some) women and men receive this gratuitous election, manifest in their choice of God and the life of grace over self-will. Ideally this redeemed state should be expressed in the choice of virginity or sexual continence (if they were previously married). Although Augustine sees marriage and procreation as natural goods, appropriate to the era before the coming of Christ, now in Christian time, with the rapid approach of the end of history, redeemed humans express their redemption best by sexual continence, anticipating the heavenly state “where there will be no marriage or giving in marriage,” although Christian married people can also be redeemed.

Women in grace, whether continent or married, however, for Augustine do not transcend their subordination to men within history. As we have seen, this subordination of women to men is inherent in their created condition. Both as subordinate by the nature of their femaleness and as punishment for their culpability for sin expressed in disobedience to God, women in grace should voluntarily accept not only their subordination to the male, but even a coercive form of this subordination. Augustine admired his mother because she quietly acquiesced to his father’s violence, even though she was morally superior to him.

For him, Monica was the model of how women should accept their subordination to men. For Augustine, only women are under subordination in the original creation. This subordination is inherent in their female roles of helpmeets to men. There was no subordination of some men to others in the original creation, but the fall and sinful self-will brought about social disorder. Thus various forms of domination are necessary to prevent lawlessness in society, such as slavery, the domination of peasants by landlords and coercion of rebels by the state. Heretics and dissidents also need to be coerced by the Christian state and forced to submit to the rulings of the
church. Thus Augustine justified hierarchical and coercive social systems to compensate for the lawlessness brought about by sin.

Although women are doubly under subordination both in their original created nature and in their culpability for sin, and should express their converted state by quiet acquiescence to whatever male authority is over them, their husbands, if married, and bishops in the church, there is no domination in heaven. For Augustine redemption is not simply restoration to the original state of nature, where women were in any case subordinate, but a transcendence of it. The first humans were able not to sin and hence not to die through the free will which they lost in sin. But the redeemed humans at the resurrection will be raised above the mortal body, and the possibility for the choice of sin, to a union of God which we cannot lose because God has chosen us as the elect few by his sovereign will.

In the resurrection women will rise as women just as men will rise as men, but in such a way that their sexual parts related to procreation will be changed, as Augustine puts it “fitted to glory rather than to shame.” It is not clear what this means, but although Augustine wants to affirm that even though humans were created male and female and thus must rise as male and female, the sexual impulses and roles related to their reproductive roles somehow disappear in heaven.

Specifically women’s subordination related to this reproductive role disappears, since this no longer exists in heaven. Based on their equality in the image of God, elect women who have led a spiritual life will shine as gloriously as men. There is no gender or other social hierarchy in heaven, although apparently there is a hierarchy of spiritual merit, in which many women saints excel. But here in earth the hierarchy of men over women remains the order of creation, to be coercively enforced in the fallen condition. This is the regime to which all women, even saintly virgins, should submit with completely docility. Their heavenly spiritual merit is not lessened but is enhanced thereby.

Augustine’s view of women in the order of creation, in the fall and in ultimate redemption created the pattern which was accepted as normative by subsequent Western Christian theologians. I will summarize how this same pattern is found in Thomas Aquinas in the high Middle Ages and in Luther and Calvin in the Reformation, with slight differences of emphasis.

Thomas Aquinas worsened the paradigm of women’s subordination inherited from Augustine by adopting the philosophy of Aristotle in which women are seen as biologically inferior, defective in mind, body and will, and thus are, in Aristotle’s words, “natural slaves.” Yet Aquinas maintains the Augustinian distinction between woman as homo or human and woman as mulier or
female. As human, woman possesses a non-gendered intellectual soul in the image of God and so is capable of redemption and ultimate enjoyment of eternal life in communion with God in heaven.

However, as female, woman was created not as an end in herself, but as a helpmeet to the male in the work of procreation (not as a friend or companion to the male, for which Aquinas follows Augustine in opining that another male, not a female, would have been more appropriate). But Aquinas combines these Augustinian views with Aristotle’s definition of woman as defective in her bodily, volitional and intellectual capacities. In Aristotle’s biology, the male seed is seen as providing the form and active power in procreation, while the female only provides the “matter” that is formed. Normatively every male seed should produce another male. Women are generated by an accident or defect in this process in which the female matter is incompletely formed by the male seed and so a defective human or female results. Women thus is inherently incomplete or lacking in full humanness.

For Aquinas, following Aristotle, the woman is by nature weaker in physical strength, in will power and in intellect. This defectiveness means that women are incapable of exercising sovereignty over herself, much less over anyone else. The social hierarchy in which the male rules and the female is ruled by the male is biologically necessary, and parallels the relation of the active mind and passive matter. Aristotle sees a parallel hierarchy in the relations of masters and slaves, and free Greeks over “orientals,” similar to the relation of humans over animals and ultimately of humans over material creation. But among humans only women are defined as biologically inferior and defective in relation to males.

His view of women as defective affects Aquinas’ Christology and view of ordination to the priesthood. Christ not only happened to be a male; he had to be incarnated as a male to represent the headship of the New Adam over regenerated humanity, because only the male possesses “perfect” or complete humanness in soul and body. This means only males can be priests since only males can image Christ. Women are not only barred from priestly ordination juridically. By nature women cannot validly receive this sacrament since their defective humanness cannot image Christ, exemplify excellence or exercise sovereignty.

This inferiority and subjugation of women would have existed in the original creation before sin since it reflects biological nature. In the original creation the body would have been mortal although undying because of its perfect submission to God. Procreation would have taken place physically, including defloration of the woman. The chief difference was that in the original creation the perfect submission of the body to the intellect and thereby to God would have reflected a perfect
ordering of the higher over the lower levels of creation or what Aquinas calls “original justice”. This would have meant a complete state of virtue, although not face-to-face communion with God, which comes about only through grace transcending nature.

The fall into sin destroyed this original justice, but did not destroy the inclination of the soul to virtue, according to Aquinas. The body, no longer in communion with the intellectual soul and God, fell into its natural mortality. Eve was more guilty than Adam for this fall, because she sinned not only against God in disobedience, but against her neighbor, Adam, in seducing him. But the fall could only have happened through Adam’s consent, since he and not she possessed the higher reason that can exercise headship over humanity. Women not only share the loss of original justice and falls into morality and sin, but she is punished for her special guilt by being inflicted with the pains of childbirth and by coercive male domination over her, worsening her original subordination.

Aquinas follows Augustine in teaching that original sin is passed down through the sexual act, but changes the focus. The male seed cannot transmit original justice since it no longer possesses it. So the male procreative act can only generate fallen humans lacking this original virtue. Sexuality, which would have been pleasurable in paradise, has been worsened through disordered lust, but this in itself does not transmit sin, but simply is evidence of the sinful state.

Although women by nature are barred from ordination to the priesthood, God can bestow prophetic gifts on them. This is possible because prophetic gifts come from God, not from women’s eminence. Women as female can’t represent excellence, but this does not mean that some women might not possess spiritual gifts. Indeed Aquinas suggests that some women are better in soul that many men. But since women are barred from public teaching, women with prophetic gifts cannot impart them in public. They can only communicate them to men in authority, who both authorize their validity and impart their contents to the public.

Women also cannot exercise any temporal jurisdiction since they lack the capacity for sovereignty, although Aquinas does allow that an abbess can exercise limited spiritual authority over her community as delegated to her by male authorities over her. He also rejects the legitimacy of women exercising temporal authority inherited from their families, such as queens, a view that puts him in conflict with feudal practice where women as daughters of kings lacking brothers did inherit and exercise temporal power.

While women, in Aquinas’ view, are in a state of subordination, worsened into domination, in the historical reality of social relations, gender hierarchy vanishes on the level of salvation and the heavenly world. Here women exist simply as homo, made in the image of God and equally capable of
salvation. As elect, gifted by and in cooperation with grace, women stand on an equal footing with men. There is no gender discrimination in election. In heaven women are as likely to be in the highest ranks of the blessed as the most eminent men in the church. Thus Aquinas teaches a spiritual equality on the level of grace that belies his systematic exclusion of women from any temporal power in creation, based on their created and sinful status of defective inferiority.

Martin Luther follows along similar lines in his views of gender in creation fall and redemption to the teachings of Augustine and Aquinas, with emphases of his own. Luther pioneered the Reformation attack on celibacy as a superior spiritual state closer to redemption. For Luther, few “men” are capable of maintaining celibacy and so the effort to force this on the clergy simply means that most priests fall below this standard into sexual promiscuity. But even more important, marriage is God’s intended state of life for men and women in the created order, which has not been transcended in the Christian era.

Luther believes that Adam and Eve would have had normal sex in the Garden of Eden and she would have borne many strong healthy children. Unlike today these children would have been able to stand up and walk right away, rather than spending some months in dependency. As originally created, Adam and Eve would have been physically, morally and mentally perfect. They would both have had perfect knowledge of God and understanding of nature that would have made them use its resources wisely. They would have embraced each other lovingly and had pleasurable sex without shame or lust. They also would not have died. After a long happy life they would have simply fallen asleep and been taken into heaven with God.

Woman, Luther insists was created equally in God’s image and would have been equally perfect in paradise, acting as co-administrator of the land and animals with Adam. Yet Luther also believes that women, while in no way defective, was nevertheless “different” as female. She had a “weaker” nature that man and not his equal in glory and prestige. Thus some element of women’s secondary nature was inherent in her role as mother and homemaker.

But this long happy and fruitful life in paradise was not to be. On the first Sabbath after the creation of humans on the 6th day, after God instructed Adam to avoid eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and Adam in turn instructed Eve in God’s command, Satan approached Eve as the weaker of the human pair. While she was deceived by the serpent and capitulated to its lies, Adam was not deceived by the serpent, but acceded to his wife to please her.
This fall into disobedience worked an instant change in both of their natures. They lost their original wisdom and became stupid and fearful. The fallen world into which they were expelled was also distorted, with Adam punished by hard labor on a rocky earth and Eve punished by painful childbearing and coercive domination by her husband. A new dichotomy between the home and the public realm of war and the state appears. Adam alone has power in this public realm while woman is commanded to remain in the private realm of the home “like a nail driven into a wall.” Although women would have been lesser that man in paradise, Luther images it as a happy freely, accepted complementarity, while now the relation of the sexes has been worsened into forceful rule by males and servitude for women.

For Luther this servitude is in no way to be alleviated by redemption in Christ. Woman is justly punished by this subjugation, and is to remain firmly excluded from any power in the temporal realm and from any leadership in the Church. Not only are women not to be ordained; they should not teach or preach in Church. Even the gifts of prophecy given to women, accepted in the medieval Christianity, were rejected by Luther and Calvin. Although they acknowledged that women exercised prophetic gifts in Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament, they saw these as emergency situations, not to be continued in the Christian era. While Luther accepts that women was given equality in the image of God in the original creation and still possesses it, and so can be redeemed equally in heaven, here and now redemption does not change her dominated status defined by her original lesser nature and a servitude and exclusion from any public leadership that manifests her status as punished for sin.

Calvin’s theological anthropology of gender in creation, fall and redemption comes out in practice in much the same place as Luther’s. Calvin however thinks of women’s secondary status in creation and subjugation in the fall in more juridical terms, while Luther inclines to an ontological view of women as innately different and lesser as woman. Calvin was also more aware of challenges to Biblical justifications of women’s subordination by Renaissance feminists. Some powerful Protestant women held temporal power and wealth and could patronize the Reformers or be offended by them. So he sought to define more precisely his views that women were both “equal” and also secondary in creation and were subjugated to worsened servitude due to culpability for sin.

Calvin, like Luther, Aquinas and Augustine, affirms that women were created equally in the image of God in those matters which have to do with the spiritual realm. But women were not given
by God that part of the image of God that has to do with dominion. This means that women were excluded from any role in public government in the order of creation. This also means that women in the church are not to have any public leadership as ordained ministers, teachers or preachers, including as prophets. Although God might have made some exceptions to this in emergency situations, for Calvin women’s exclusion from these roles are normative, stemming from their exclusion from public rule in God’s original design for society. Calvin is aware of the troubling case of women rulers in his own time. While he accepts that they are to be obeyed as legal heirs, he sees their existence as an expression of an exceptional situation caused by social disorder, in which God has seen fit to humiliate sinful men by having them obey a woman. Thus women rulers should never be seen as a “normal.”

For Calvin women was created to be companions and assistants to men to help them live well. This relation was intended to be one of dominant and subordinate “partners,” with the male as head of the household. But this relation would have originally been completely harmonious since both would have accepted their place in this divinely appointed order. But with the fall marriage became filled with strife, sorrow and dissension” primarily due to woman’s insubordination and failure to accept her role. The good Christian wife, by contrast, understands both her spiritual capacities and her subordinate role in society, and accepts both without complaint.

In Calvin’s description of the fall, he plays down the notion that Eve was approached by Satan because she was morally or intellectually weaker or that Adam was less guilty. The basic sin of both was unbelief or apostasy from God’s command and authority from which flow all other sins and evils. Although both sinned equally, they are punished differently, each in the context of his or her different responsibilities, he as tiller of the soil and she as wife and child-bearer. Thus painful childbearing and forceful dominion under her husband were Eve’s particular punishments. But Calvin also suggests that Eve’s sin was not only against God’s authority but also against the authority of her husband. Thus forceful subjugation of woman is necessary to make women obey their husbands when they have failed to do so willingly.

Woman as members of the elect will be saved equally with the male and share equally in eternal life, according to divine grace renewing her inner spiritual nature as image of God. But this ultimate equal redemption in no ways suspends the laws of creation by which the woman is
subordinated to the man in the temporal order of creation. Under sin, this has been worsened into more coercive subjugation, necessary to counteract women’s tendencies to resist male rule.