

# Gender theory and the transformation of the human person

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## 1. Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*

Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'* offers some important insights into *gender theory*. Very often, the encyclical is seen only as an ecological encyclical, as if it dealt only with environmental issues, issues that are indeed addressed but are placed in a much broader context, with the critique of the technocratic paradigm, which presumes to be able to completely understand reality, to be able to dominate it, and thus to be able to plan man and society of the future by means of technical reason, which is the greatest challenge for an integral ecology: "Ecological culture cannot be reduced to a series of urgent and partial responses to the problems that arise regarding environmental degradation, depletion of natural reserves and pollution. It should be a different outlook, a thought, a policy, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality that shape a resistance to the advancing technocratic paradigm" (n. 111).

The very title of the encyclical *Laudato si'*, taken from the *Canticle of the Creatures* by Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), presents the concept of creation as the most profound key to understanding ecological issues and, by recognising a divine plan in nature, transcends the vision of the natural sciences: "to say 'creation' is more than saying nature, because it has to do with a project of God's love, where every creature has a value and a meaning. Nature is often understood as a system that is analysed, understood and managed, but creation can only be understood as a gift flowing from the open hand of the Father of all, as a reality enlightened by love that summons us to a universal communion" (n. 76).

The encyclical recalls in numerous passages the fundamental importance of the concept of creation and defends it against naturalistic theories that exclude both the existence and the work of a creator God, and instead argue that nature and man, as they present themselves today, would be merely the spontaneous product of a development determined not by a plan, but only by chance and the laws of nature. "I am aware that, in the field of politics and thought, some strongly reject the idea of a Creator, or consider it irrelevant, to the point of that they relegate to the realm of the irrational the richness that religions can offer for an integral ecology and the full development of humankind. At other times they are assumed to constitute a subculture that must simply be tolerated" (n. 62).

The encyclical rejects worldviews that deny creation: "Thus we are shown that the world comes from a decision, not from chaos or randomness, and this elevates it even more. There is a free choice expressed in the creative word" (no. 77). Further on, the concept of "creative word" is further clarified: "The prologue of John's Gospel (1:1-18) shows the creative activity of Christ as the divine Word (Logos)" (no. 99). "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God: all things were made through him, and without him nothing was made of all that exists" (Jn 1:1-3).

Nature thus becomes the place of divine revelation and it is precisely "St Francis, faithful to Scripture, proposes that we recognise nature as a splendid book in which God speaks to us and conveys something of his beauty and goodness" (n. 12).

Considering nature as a creation, i.e. as a manifestation of the divine plan, enhances it, but at the same time, emphasising the distance that separates it from God, "demythologises" it (cf. n. 78), and does not even attribute to it a dignity equal to that of man. Considering nature a manifestation of God "does not mean equating all living beings and depriving the human being of that special value that implies at the same time a tremendous responsibility. Nor does it imply a deification of the earth, which would deprive us of the call to collaborate with it and protect its fragility. Such conceptions would end up creating new imbalances in an attempt to escape from the reality that challenges us" (n. 90).

It is necessary to recognise man's superiority to other entities of nature, the particularity of his psychic functions and their non-reducibility to natural, physical and biological processes. The encyclical rejects, therefore, the claim of modern science, and in particular certain currents of neuroscience and neurophilosophy, to explain psychic activity as a natural phenomenon and as the result of an evolutionary process: 'The human being, although it also presupposes evolutionary processes, involves a novelty that cannot be fully explained by the evolution of other open systems. Each of us has within us a personal identity capable of entering into

dialogue with others and with God himself. The capacity for reflection, reasoning, creativity, interpretation, artistic elaboration and other original capacities display a singularity that transcends the physical and biological realm. The qualitative novelty implied by the emergence of a personal being within the material universe presupposes a direct action of God, a peculiar call to life and relationship of one You to another You. Starting from the biblical texts, we consider the person as a subject, which can never be reduced to the category of object" (n. 81).

The conception of man created in the image and likeness of God "shows us the immense dignity of every human person" (n. 65), but, at the same time, implies acceptance of divine law and the dignity of creation.

The encyclical rejects the accusation that biblical discourse would have fostered a possessive and domineering attitude towards nature, on the contrary, "Precisely because of his unique dignity and because he is endowed with intelligence, the human being is called to respect creation with its internal laws, since 'the Lord founded the earth with wisdom' (Prov 3:19)" (n. 69). But man has not accepted his role as a creature and "This fact has also distorted the nature of the mandate to subdue the earth (cf. Gen 1:28) and to cultivate and guard it (cf. Gen 2:15). As a result, the originally harmonious relationship between human beings and nature has turned into a conflict (cf. Gen 3:17-19)" (n. 66). The rejection of this role gave rise to "a despotic anthropocentrism" (n. 68) and "deviant" (n. 69).

Understood as creation, nature would not be inert matter that could be manipulated at will.

"In fact, human intervention that favours the prudent development of creation is the most appropriate way of caring for it, because it implies acting as God's instrument to help bring out the potentialities that he himself has inscribed in things" (n.124).

Denied the Creator, the man-nature relationship can be of two types: man is considered as a "particle of nature" and thus can fall into naturalism, or man is considered as superior to nature, with the risk of falling into absolute anthropocentrism.

The encyclical emphasises that the current ecological crisis is not limited to man's conflictual relationship with external nature, his inability to recognise nature as created, hence the structure and order of things, but also concerns man's relationship with his own nature, even his inability to accept his own nature as male and female. "Human ecology also implies something very profound: the necessary relationship of human life with the moral law inscribed in its own nature [...]. Benedict XVI stated that there is an 'ecology of man' because 'man also possesses a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will'. In this vein, it must be recognised that our body places us in a direct relationship with the environment and other living beings. [...] Appreciating one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is also necessary in order to be able to recognise oneself in the encounter with the other that is different from oneself. [...] Therefore, an attitude that claims to 'erase sexual difference because it can no longer confront it' is not healthy" (No. 155).

## 2. The transformation of the human person

Several authors have described this identity crisis of modern and post-modern man: the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre wrote that 'it is necessary to note that the specifically modern self, in acquiring sovereignty in its own realm, has lost the traditional boundaries that had been provided for it by a social identity and a vision of human life as a process oriented towards a predetermined end'.

This anthropological crisis also manifests itself in the confusion of terms to designate man. In literature, terms such as person, personality, self, identity, self-understanding are sometimes used as synonyms. In his considerations on the modern, postmodern and transmodern self, the American psychologist Paul C. Vitz states, for example, that he uses "the terms 'self', 'person' and sometimes 'identity' as relatively interchangeable. I hope that context will clarify the differences in meaning of these terms. The concept of person is the broadest of these notions, since it includes the totality of body, mind and spirit. The self is a subcategory, if you like, of person; the self does not normally include the spirit or the totality of these three terms, it is a part of them. Identity is a subcategory or component of the self'.

The fact that the term person can be replaced by that of identity or self is a legacy of modernity characterised by the dualism of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* of the French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) who, with the intention of rescuing higher psychic activities from the tendencies of the time to explain all mankind mechanistically, clearly separated the psyche, *res cogitans*, from the 'machine' of the body, *res extensa*. In this way, the psyche was made independent of the body and, so to speak 'disembodied', became 'autonomous', in the true sense of the term, which derives from the Greek *autòs* self and *nòmos* law, and the modern individual does not accept laws or norms, but it is he himself who claims to decide the norms of his own behaviour.

Descartes opposed the classical conception of the soul as the form of the body, which therefore admits a close relationship between a given soul and a given body.

Slowly, however, the 'modern' conception of the ego, characterised by autonomy and an overestimation of reason that led to rationalism, was challenged, with the gradual shift to a postmodern view. Karl Marx (181-1883) denied the existence of human nature: 'Human existence is not an abstraction immanent to the single individual. In its reality, it is the totality of social relations'. For the founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), the ego became merely a compromise between the unconscious, i.e. the id, and external reality. The other important representative of 20th-century depth psychology, Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), linking himself to the ancient, pre-Christian meaning of the person that designated the mask worn by theatre actors, believes that man, as a person, only impersonates a role that has been imposed on him by society. Jung thus deconstructs the Christian conception of the person: there would be no relationship between the nature of the individual and the personal dimension, but, as in a theatrical performance, the individual would play the role that has been assigned to him, post-modern man sees his existence as participation in a carnival, he chooses which mask he wants to wear, or perhaps he only believes this, because in reality his choices are often not free but conditioned.

In the transition from modern to postmodern ego, rationalism has given way to relativism: there would be no objective, normative moral order. Each person arrogates to himself the right to assume the individuality he prefers. On the one hand, relativism influenced the openness to all forms of individualism by recognising new rights; on the other hand, advances in medicine and biotechnology offered new means to manipulate the human body.

### 3. Sigmund Freud and the bisexual conception of man

In discussions about new theories of sexual identity, the role played by Sigmund Freud's theories is rarely mentioned. Freud criticised the scientific literature of his time on homosexuality, because there is 'no sufficiently clear demarcation between the problems of object choice on the one hand and sexual character and sexual orientation on the other'.

To explain an individual's sexual tendency Freud distinguished three aspects: the 'physical sexual characteristics (somatic hermaphroditism)', the 'psychic sexual characteristics (male or female setting)' - a concept that has affinities with the modern concept of 'gender role' -, and the 'type of object choice', i.e. sexual orientation. Freud warns of 'loosening in our thoughts the link between drive and object', criticises as simplistic theories that make sexual orientation depend on biological sex, and thus the existence of a finalism of instincts that would limit the choice of ways to satisfy them, and declares himself convinced 'of an original bisexuality of the human individual'. As far as sexual identity is concerned, Freud interprets it as an interaction between a certain predisposition and the environment, and, as a psychologist, he particularly emphasises interpersonal relationships within the family.

#### 3.1 Bisexuality of the human being

Although Freud argued in later works that the theory of human bisexuality has a biological basis: 'Psychoanalysis places itself on the same plane as biology in that it hypothesises an original bisexuality of the human individual (as well as of the animal)', this theory, which played a central role in the development of psychoanalysis, was suggested to Freud by Wilhelm Fliess (1858-1928), a German otolaryngologist who was his closest interlocutor, confidant, and advisor for years. In the course of time, Freud attached increasing importance to the theory of bisexuality: already in a letter to Fliess in 1896 he considered it indispensable for understanding neuroses and perversions, and in a letter of 1898 he claimed that he did not underestimate it at all and expected it to provide all kinds of clarification. He later claimed that: "Psychoanalytic investigation refuses with great energy to separate homosexuals as a particular species group from other people. It, by studying sexual arousal from those who manifest themselves, knows that all people are capable of choosing a sexual object of the same sex and have also made this choice in the unconscious".

In a letter to Wilhelm Fliess dated 7 August 1901, Freud credited him with the paternity of the bisexuality theory and recalled that he had argued years earlier that sexuality was the solution to psychic issues, Fliess corrected him by specifying 'in bisexuality'. Ernst Jones (1879-1958), Freud's close collaborator and biographer, considers the theory of bisexuality an "[...] axiom which Freud acquired from his friend Fliess and has never since abandoned: the natural bisexuality not only of all human beings, but of all living creatures". Psychologist and historian of psychology David Bakan (1921-2004), argues that Fliess "[...] combined three important Kabbalistic elements in his main thought: the concept of bisexuality, the extensive use of numerology, and the doctrine of

predestination”.

At first Freud used the theory of bisexuality to interpret clinical cases and to explain the nature of the human being, his psychic development and thus also the normal behaviour of each individual; “[...] the bonds of libidinal feelings with persons of the same sex have as factors in normal sexual life no less importance than those directed towards the opposite sex and greater importance as reasons for illness”.

The founder of psychoanalysis denies the existence of a qualitative difference between behaviour he defines as normal on the one hand and abnormal or pathological behaviour on the other. For example, the same psychic constitution present in persons with extreme forms of homosexuality would be present, albeit only in ‘lesser intensity, in the constitution of transitional types and in manifestly normal individuals. The differences in the results may be of a qualitative nature: the analysis indicates that the differences in the conditions are only quantitative’. In other words, precisely because of the bisexual nature of the human individual, extreme forms of homosexuality and heterosexuality would represent only the extreme poles of a range of intermediate possibilities, of ‘transition types’.

Freud was thus convinced not only of its importance in explaining pathological phenomena, but that bisexuality would be a characteristic of human nature: ‘Man, too, is an animal organism of undoubtedly bisexual disposition. The individual corresponds to a fusion of two symmetrical halves, of which, according to the opinion of some researchers, one is purely male, the other female’.

In every human being there would originally be present the two components male and female, which, depending on the conditions in which the individual develops and lives, could manifest themselves in very different forms and combinations. In any case, it would not be possible to understand the psyche of an individual without taking into account the component opposite to his or her sex: ‘Since I have become familiar with the idea of bisexuality, I consider this factor to be decisive here; without taking bisexuality into account, one can hardly come to an understanding of the sexual manifestations actually observable in men and women’.

### 3.2 Psychic development

Freud builds his theory of bisexuality on a number of problematic assumptions: every expression of pleasure in the child is interpreted as the satisfaction of a sexual desire and the child’s attachment to the parent of the same sex is regarded as homosexual and thus as a manifestation of their bisexuality. Freud must, however, admit that psychoanalysis: “[...] cannot clarify the profound essence of what is called ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in common and biological language, and must limit itself to assuming these two concepts as the basis of its work. If he attempts a further reduction, masculinity would dissolve into activity and femininity into passivity, which is too little’.

Each individual would develop from his or her bisexual disposition. Freud, for example, states that psychoanalysis does not set out to describe what woman is, ‘but to investigate the way in which she becomes woman, the way in which from the girl, who has a bisexual disposition, woman develops’. The same would be true of males: ‘all male individuals, as a result of their bisexual disposition and cross-transmission, unite masculine and feminine characteristics in themselves, so that pure virility and femininity remain theoretical constructions of uncertain content’. The bisexual nature would be present at all stages of life: ‘In all of us the libido normally oscillates, throughout life, between the male and female object’ and would underlie both normal and pathological behaviour.

## 4. Esoteric origins of the theory of human bisexuality

As mentioned, David Bakan claims that the theory of bisexuality was inspired by the Kabbalistic theories of Wilhelm Fliess. However, the theme of bisexuality also recurs in other esoteric traditions as a conception of the androgynous human being. Of interest is a famous novel by the French writer Honoré de Balzac, (1799 -1850): *Séraphîta*, in which the protagonist is an androgynous being, who at the same time is perceived and loved by the other protagonists as a woman as *Séraphîta*, or as a man, with the male name of *Seraphitus*. *Séraphîta* is an ethereal being, detached from the things of this world and who does not actively live her sexuality, but manages to inwardly realise the synthesis of the male and female components, and at the end of the novel ascends to heaven as an angel, precisely as a seraphim. Balzac openly declares that he follows the religiosity of the esotericist Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), and according to the historian of religions Mircea Eliade (1907-1986): ‘*Séraphîta* is undoubtedly the most fascinating of Balzac’s fantastic novels. Certainly not because of the theories of Swedenborg with which it is imbued, but because Balzac succeeded in illuminating with the light of art a fundamental theme of archaic anthropology: the androgyne seen as the exemplary image of the

perfect man’.

Of the various traditions that have taught the supposedly original androgyny of the human being in our cultural area, the most important is the Gnostic strand, which in the first centuries of our era posed a grave danger to Christianity, but which has continued to threaten its integrity to the present day, albeit in different forms.

## 5. Conclusions

Freud and psychoanalysis have exerted considerable influence on modern psychology and, thus, on Western civilisation and have played an important role in the sexual revolution and gender theory, denying the finalism between the sexual apparatus and sexual orientation, and arguing that from childhood it would be possible to fix sexual orientation on different objects and thus develop perversions. Genetically, however, there are two sexes, the book of Genesis says: “God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). The encyclical *Laudato si’* argues that man must position himself “as God’s instrument to help bring out the potentialities that He Himself has inscribed in things” (n.124) and thus also the potentialities of male and female. For Freud, on the other hand, ‘It is instructive that the child can, under the influence of seduction, become a polymorphous pervert and can be initiated into all possible prevarications’, and he admits that ‘[...] it is definitely impossible not to recognise something universally human and original in the uniform predisposition towards all perversions’.

Here Freud still uses expressions like ‘seduction’, ‘uniform predisposition towards all perversions’, gender theories, on the other hand, consider them as legitimate manifestations of a fluid sexuality.

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