

A world without gender

NCR, April 10, 2018, Ilia Delio, Franciscan Sister, Washington, DC teaches at Villanova University

I am amazed at the power of women to stand up and speak out in the name of dignity, respect and justice. Yet surprisingly our systemic disease of patriarchy proceeds unabated. I have wondered why neither the church nor the academy or social/political machines can form a new matrix of gender equality. The late Canadian historian David Noble proposed a thesis over 20 years ago that, upon reflection, may hold some important insights. To begin with, Noble dispels the myth that the church is opposed to modern science. The perceived conflict between science and religion is a modern construction fueled by fundamentalism and biblical literalism.

The Catholic Church has never opposed science, but then what prevents the church from embracing modern science? Pope Pius XII opened the door to evolution in his 1950 encyclical *Humani generis*, and Pope John Paul II spoke of the need to reconcile science and religion, saying they can mutually enrich one another. Pope Benedict spoke of the Resurrection as an "evolutionary leap" forward for the whole cosmos, and Pope Francis highlights the tenets of evolution in his encyclical *Laudato Si'*. One wonders why evolution and big history are not mandatory for doing theology in the 21st century.

According to Noble, the church will not turn toward the light of science because the church and the academy (both marked by the medieval notion of "science" or forms of knowledge) are in collusion. That is, they are not only *not* opposed to one another; they actually share the same goal which, Noble states, is the divinization of the fallen Adam. Now here the story gets quite interesting. In his book *A World Without Women*, Noble accrued a store of historical evidence (although much of it is secondary sources) to show that the church and science have the same aim, namely, the apotheosis of the male Adam and the subjection of the female Eve.

The roots of the Adam and Eve myth are deeply rooted in the ancient notion that women are weak and inferior. Plato wrote in his *Timaeus* that men have a soul superior to that of women, and Aristotle held that women have incomplete intellects so that "the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject." These philosophical ideas were carried over to the Christian world, where women were deemed by many church fathers as incomplete images of the image of God, despite the fact that many women heroically exemplified Christian ideals. Noble challenged the commonly held assumption that modern science developed in opposition to an authoritarian church, claiming instead that the celibate male-dominated Catholic tradition provided both support and inspiration for the scientific tradition that would virtually supplant it.

Christianity originated as a potentially egalitarian religion, Noble says, but almost from the beginning, women were forced to struggle against political and cultural forces aimed at pushing them out of the spiritual mainstream and into the home. He argues that the clerical culture of

medieval Europe, as a result of specific historical events, was misogynistic. Because science as practiced in medieval and Renaissance Europe was a Christian activity, conducted by clerics, there was little, if any, room in the scientific community for women. Noble links the great names in the Scientific Revolution, Protestant and Catholic alike, with monastic, misogynistic, ascetic attitudes.

It was a male-dominated, misogynistic church, then, that established the European colleges from which modern science sprang — colleges in which the pursuit of knowledge was considered a sacred act; scholars were treated as a kind of monk, celibacy was encouraged, and women were categorically excluded. According to what Noble calls the "clerical ascetic" view, sexual desire was an ineradicable and volatile source of temptation; even baptized Christians were under its power. Under such circumstances, clerical ascetics concluded that it was better to avoid contact with women completely, lest their seductive powers lead to sin. Clerical asceticism was virulently misogynous; women are dangerous to spiritual health. Clerics seeking to maintain their power sharpened their attacks on heresy but at the same time adopted practices of heretical sects — including celibacy which came to signify the superiority of the clergy over the mass of married laity.

The universities that grew out of cathedral schools during the high Middle Ages adopted the clerical ascetic ideal. This exclusively masculine setting was later impressed on the early institutions of modern science which operated, according to Noble, as a "scientific asceticism." In his book, *The Religion of Technology*, Noble claims these origins have led to today's curiously anomalous scientific priesthood in which women continue to be discriminated against and dismissed.

Instead of being intrinsically inimical to modern science, the atavistic religious urge to transcend the world, as mediated to modernity by monks of the Middle Ages, is actually science's very nursery. Had its male founders not been energized by intense religious longing for a better world than this one, Noble contends, it is doubtful that they would ever have embarked upon their journeys of discovery.

The aim of science and the aim of the church are the same, namely, to restore Adam's divine dignity, shared with God at the beginning of creation, but lost in the fall due to the inferiority of Eve. Whether or not one accepts Noble's thesis that the church and science are actually in collusion against women (rather than the church as the enemy of science) is a subject for discussion; however, the trajectory of the 21st century seems to be moving in a new direction.

Whereas Noble thought that modern technology (especially artificial intelligence) would aid the Adamic enterprise of lost perfection, the development of artificial intelligence is leading in a new direction beyond what Noble suggested. Technology has destabilized our view of nature, revealing the "plasticity" of nature. The rise of artificial intelligence shows that fixity and

determinism are not intrinsic to nature. Rather nature can be hybridized and refashioned; nature is informational and relational.

The cyborg (an abbreviation for cybernetic organism) symbolizes the plasticity of nature. Everything from cell phones and computers to hearing aids, knee implants and pacemakers counts as part of the process of cyborgization. As a cultural symbol, the cyborg signifies that human "nature" is not self-evident. A cyborg body is not bounded by skin but includes all external pathways along which information can travel. That is, the boundaries are spatially and temporally situated and none of them are "necessary."

The cyborg has the potential not only to disrupt persistent dualisms that set the natural body in opposition to the technologically recrafted body, but also to refashion our thinking about the theoretical understanding of the body as a material entity and a discursive process. Hence what counts as human is not and should not be self-evident.

In the 1980s social philosopher Donna Haraway wrote *The Cyborg Manifesto*, indicating that when technology intersects with the body, either in reality or in representations, the basis of gendered subjectivity crumbles. The term "posthuman" does not really mean the end of humanity but the end of a certain conception of the human as autonomous being exercising one's will through individual agency and choice. Posthuman subjectivity is an emergent process whereby human functionality expands through electronic prostheses. Technology is reinventing the human person in a new way, as if human nature has been enslaved by patriarchy and seeks to be liberated from the Adam myth, even though science and technology have supported the myth.

Martine Rothblatt, author of *Virtually Human: the promise and peril of digital immortality*, sees the future of gender as a new freedom and fluidity of form, indicating a move away from Western patriarchal essentialism toward "the utopian dream of the hope for a world without gender." In a post-gendered world, there is no story of original perfection, bliss, fallenness and death and thus no defining limits of nature.

Noble thought that both science and the church are fixed on restoring the male Adam to divine perfection while ignoring the needs of justice, sustainability and ecological wholeness. But something else is going on. Technology has destabilized our view of nature, our understanding of gender and the notion of human personhood. The boundaries between human and animal, organism and machine, and physical and nonphysical have become imprecise for us. This breakdown creates a space of possibility precisely because things do not work smoothly anymore. Dismantling the centered and masterful subject is an affirmative project, ending not in the absence of the subject or its incorporation into the body of nature, but in new and positive conceptions of social subjectivity.

While the church insists on a male clerical elite and a three-tiered universe (heaven, hell, earth), technology is creating a new type of person hybridized with androgynous robots. While the church emphasizes sin and fallenness, technology is aiming for brain downloading and digital

immortality. The religious dimension of human nature is being repackaged and sold as wearable devices. That is, technology is seeking to replace religion and claims it can deliver a better product. Will we be any better off as humanoids or androids? Will a postgendered world be less sinful or perhaps a sinless world? I doubt it. We will have the same problems and likely some new problems that will cause us to constantly reinvent ourselves.

Teilhard de Chardin wrote that Christianity is a religion of evolution. Until we can let go of the Adam myth and take hold of evolution as the way God is creating unto the fullness of life, we will continue to have a church losing members to the lures of technology and social media. How can the church hope to instill a consciousness of integral ecology when it cannot own up to modern biology? Instead of trying to defend the elite fallen male, the church might face up to the reality that Adam and Eve never existed as a single couple responsible for a defect in the species. If the church cannot accept modern biology and a deeply enmeshed biological God, then how in the world will we ever be set free?