



Sister Prudence Allen, R.S.M.
*The Concept of Woman:
a Synthesis in One Volume*
[Koncepcja kobiety:
synteza w jednym tomie].
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Sister Prudence Allen, R.S.M., retired professor of philosophy at St John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, has spent years doing research on philosophical approaches to gender issues. She has published some very important articles on Jacques and Raissa Maritain as well as Pope John Paul II's concept of the complementarity of men and women. In the foreword to *The Concept of Woman: a Synthesis in One Volume*, John Cavadini states that the reviewed book was written to serve as a guide to the author's legacy, and yet it also stands by itself as a coherent and complete exposition of the long and complex development of the concept of woman. A one-volume synthesis is a remarkable achievement, taking into consideration the fact that Professor Allen published countless articles and addresses on this topic and her research culminates in a collection of three extraordinary volumes concerning the history of the philosophical questions that pertain to the concept of woman. The three volumes are published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company based in Grand Rapids (Michigan, USA). The collection consists of three

volumes: *The Concept of Woman: the Aristotelian Revolution, 750 BC–AD 1250* (1997), *The Concept of Woman: the Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500* (2002) and *The Search for Communion of Persons, 1500–2015* (2016). This one-volume synthesis consists of “a concise summary of the conclusions reached in the previously published three volumes.”¹

Professor Allen adheres to a philosophical methodology that appeals to sensory observation and experience, using logic and reason to support her arguments concerning the “integral gender complementarity” – the central concept and theme of her work. The four principles of “integral gender complementarity” are (i) the equal dignity of all human beings; (ii) the significant difference between male and female human beings; (iii) the synergic relation between men and women; (iv) the principle of intergenerational fruition. These four principles are in fact part of divine revelation found in the *Book of Genesis*. The philosophical impetus of Sister Allen’s work derives from her fundamental question – “can the theory of the integral gender complementarity of woman and man be proved?” Through a thorough study of philosophical sources, from the pre-Socratic to twentieth century philosophers, Allen discovers and explains an intricate set of arguments and further distinctions tracing back to the set of original ideas found in Aristotle and Augustine. Aristotle, of course, defined the soul as the “first grade of actuality in a body which is organized,” i.e. having life potentially within it. His hylomorphic understanding of the human being as a substantial composite opened the path away from the stultifying abstract uniformity of dualism carried through Platonism and from the reductionism of the naturalist philosophers.² The second key original idea comes from Augustine, as found in *The City of God* (22.17).³ Augustine argued that “the female sex is not a defect but a natural state.”⁴ Although Augustine subscribed to the theory of male superiority, he opened the way to a serious consideration of the equal dignity of men and women, a position defensible by both faith and reason.

A distinctive strength of Sister Allen’s work is that she brings into play important female voices on the topic of the status of women and the relation of men and women. She goes through such ancient/medieval thinkers as Aspasia, Hypatia, Catherine of Alexandria, and Hildegard of Bingen. She also draws readers attention to the women of the early humanist period, such as Gertrude and Saint Bridget, Catherine of Sienna, as well as Julian of Norwich, Christine de Pizan and Laura Cereta. These voices, added to the myriad of male philosophers, theologians and literati,

¹ The book under scrutiny.

² The book under scrutiny.

³ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Press, 1972/84), 1022–1068.

⁴ Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, 1057.

lead Professor Allen to propose that the long history of the debates concerning the status of the woman and the relation between men and women approach analogically John Henry Newman's proof for the development of doctrine, culminating in the theory of integral gender complementarity.⁵

The one-volume synthesis is organised into three major sections, which are presented in a historical schematic – “Gender in Ancient Greek and Medieval Philosophy,” “Gender in Renaissance, Modern and Nineteenth-century Philosophy, and “Gender Complementarity in Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries.” In each of these three sections, she summarizes the massive historical research provided in her three published books and gives the reader a look at the wealth of information, as well as the richness and diversity of sources that have characterized the long-lasting discussion and debate concerning the issues.

A turning point in the debate occurred with the rise of the new sciences and the Cartesian philosophy. The new sciences provided a more empirical and exact understanding of the woman's contribution to the generation of new life. Allen shows that “anatomy overturns the Aristotelian theory of the lack of female seed.” The efforts of the Cartesian philosophy and its circles strengthened the notion of equality of the sexes and sought opportunities to further women's education and their suffrage, especially through the work of François Poullain de la Barre (1647–1723), Mary Astell (1688–1731), and the Marquis de Condorcet (1743–94). Yet, its metaphysical dualism shattered the unity of human nature. The argument that the nonextended, sexless mind was entirely distinct from the extended material body, and that a human being was supposed to be identified more with the mind alone (the *I am a thinking thing*) than with the body or with the union of mind and body, led to the equality of uniformity and lost sight of the distinctiveness of men and women. At best, the post Cartesian thinkers struggled with a form of “fractional identity” theories wherein each gender adds in its partial or fractional way something to a greater notion of the human. If male and female human beings are significantly different, each one provides only a fraction of one whole person. The woman was thought to provide half of the mind's operations (i.e. intuition, sensation, or particular judgments) and the man was responsible for the other half (i.e. reason or universal judgments). These two fractional epistemological operations, if added together, produced only one mind. The wholeness of a person is missing and these fractional relations often contain stereotypes of hidden traditional polarity, with the male superior to the female. Examples of fractional complementarity with hidden polarity can be found in the philosophies of Jean Jacques

⁵ The book under scrutiny.

Rousseau (1712–78), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), Frederick Hegel (1770–1831), and even *Søren Kierkegaard* (1813–55).

The true foundation for an integral gender complementarity was rejected further by atheistic post-Enlightenment philosophers, such as Karl Marx (1818–83) who fostered a unisex approach to man-woman relations and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) who promoted a traditional polarity approach. The philosophies of Jean Paul Sartre (1905–80) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908–85) drew from both of these sources to defend atheistic existentialism that, following sex polarity, de-valued the woman in relation to the man. Anti-religious secular humanism gravitated instead toward a unisex approach. Finally, postmodern radical feminism vacillated between reverse gender polarity that exalted woman's over man's nature and a deconstruction of gender differentiation altogether. Interestingly, it was two students of Edmund Husserl, the founder of the phenomenological movement, who laid new foundations for ontological and experiential complementarity of the man and the woman, appealing in great part to the "lived experience" of men and women in their relationship to each other. These were Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889–1977) and St. Edith Stein (1891–1942). In 1921, Von Hildebrand broke new ground with his book on marriage (*Die Ehe*) with the bold proclamation that "the difference between man and woman is a metaphysical one. . . [and] for the human species this difference represents two manifestations of the person."⁶ Thus, the stage is set for the full discovery and validation of the complementarity of the male and female in the twentieth century, especially by a range of Catholic thinkers. In addition to the works of Dietrich von Hildebrand and Edith Stein, Professor Allen considers the important works written by Gertude LaFort, Gabriel Marcel, Emmanuel Mounier, Bernard Lonergan, and Jacques and Raissa Maritain. (265–285) Finally, the author discusses the work of Karol Wojtyła, whom she calls "the philosopher of integral gender complementarity" (347–364), and later Pope John Paul II, whom she designates "the apostle of integral gender complementarity." (366–403)

In this brief synthesis Professor Allen considers the many works of Karol Wojtyła that deepen and develop new roots for man-woman integral complementarity. His first major work on ethics in marriage, *Love and Responsibility*, explains how marriage has a "distinctive interpersonal structure" with laws "derived from the principles of the personalistic norm, for only in this way can the genuinely personal character of a union of two persons be ensured."⁷ In 1969, Wojtyła provided a metaphysical foundation for integration in *The Acting Person* by

⁶ Quoted in the book under scrutiny, 268–269.

⁷ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willets (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 348–352.

retrieving the hylomorphism of Thomas Aquinas. Allen explores the ways in which he achieved a rethinking of the dynamic aspect of the human person through an analysis of self determination, transcendence and, most of all, the dynamic notion of integration. The “person-action whole person” established a personalist structure for understanding human relations.⁸ Then, she notes that between 1974–75 Wojtyła presented a theological framework for a genuine communion of persons in two lectures: “The Family as a Community of Persons” and “Parenthood as a Communion of Persons.” (362–365) In the chapter on Pope John Paul II, Professor Allen analyzes the theology of the body (366–380). He defended the first principle of integral complementarity in equal dignity of men and women and the second principle claiming that the man and the woman are two significantly different ways of existence in the world. He uses *Mulieris dignitatem* (377–379) and “The Letter to Women” (380–383) to explain his notion of mutual submission and mutual service. The author shows that he builds upon Stein’s approach to develop a theory of women’s genius and to propose a new form of ‘feminism.’ In his “Letter to Women,” John Paul II argues that true feminism must reject traditional polarity, fractional complementarity, and unisex positions. He argued that significant differences between men and women are ontological, rooted in their very being as human persons: “womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psycho-logical points of view, but also from the ontological.” (384)⁹

The study of John Paul II concludes with an interesting look at *Vita consecrata* (1996) and we can we fully understand the communion of persons and complementarity as a deep aspect of the Church as a communion: lay life, ordained ministry and consecrated life are each a “paradigmatic vocation” to serve as a living sign of the spiritual marriage of God and the church (*Vita consecrate* §31). (384–385) Thus, after her long journey into studying the status of women and the relationship between men and women, Sister Allen ends with this statement: “Only in eternity will the search for communion of persons be ultimately fulfilled in the lives of each and every woman and man. There we hope to see face-to-face many other women and men who have completed their pilgrimage and reached their goal. There we hope to know as we have been known and love as we have been loved.” (385)

Clearly, Sister Prudence Allen has bequeathed to us a tremendous resource for studying and living the truth of our embodied human existence as male and female human persons. The three-volume work and this one-volume synthesis should be within the reach of every person exploring the truth of the mystery of human life and love.

⁸ Quoted in the book under scrutiny, 353.

⁹ Quoted in the book under scrutiny, 377–379; 380–383; 384.

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