

**IMAGINE BEING HUMAN**  
**An Anthropology of Mutuality**  
Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM, Ph.D.

Current discussions about women and their role in the world and in the Church challenge us on a most basic level to do what is both a requirement and call: imagine being human. It is a requirement because it is not possible to suggest a program for change without first using our imaginations to "know" what is wrong with our current situation. It is a call because in the act of imagining what is humanly possible to change about our situation, human beings come in touch with God in ways that will change us in the depths.

However, since we ordinarily do not realize the extent to which we live life out of the imagination, it takes reflection to find ways to imagine being human and recover the roots of our humanity in culture. Analysis is needed to ascertain the significance of images to which we give allegiance. The purpose of this paper, then, is to provide reflection on, and analysis of, three images of humanity that influence our actions. These images represent three great myths: the myth of Pandora, the myth of the androgyne, and the myth of Eve and Adam.

First of all, we must ask ourselves what are myths and how do they function, in order for myths -- great vehicles of cultural desire -- to make sense to us.

Myths have structures of intelligibility. Myths of origins, such as the three under consideration, take the human imagination back to a time "before," a time when things were not yet as they now are. In so doing, myths enable us to envision a time of "innocence," a time before things fell apart. They afford us, then, what can be called an "imaginative variation on the real."<sup>1</sup> Myths give us a point of view on what we now experience and a way to evaluate the *status quo* as in keeping with or going against the "will of the gods." Moreover, by capturing in story form the

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted throughout to Paul Ricoeur's brilliant work, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

"before" and the "after," myths give us a way to shape our longings for the future. Out of the vision of innocence comes a vision of restoration. Although we can not rely on myths to tell us how all things actually came to be, we can nevertheless learn from them.

Myths tell us not so much the way we think things are as the way we want them to be. Myths are products of desire. For this reason, as Elizabeth Janeway makes clear in her incisive work, *Man's World, Woman's Place*, myths should never be discounted.<sup>2</sup> They are important indices of human longing and, as I will argue, they operate in subtle ways to shape a social world. To understand how myths function in our lives, we must consider the myths in their concreteness.

### The Male World

Let us first discuss the story of Pandora.<sup>3</sup> According to this account, the world was originally populated by men. It was not until one of them, Prometheus by name, dared to steal fire from the gods that the innocent and all-male race of beings incurred the wrath of the great god, Zeus -- and paid for it. Angered at Prometheus' *hubris*, Zeus created the perfect punishment in the form of a lovely, alluring, seductive creature name Pandora, who was equipped with a box that she was told not to open. Overcome with curiosity, Pandora nevertheless opened her box. Out came all the ills that plague humankind. When she saw what was happening, the myth tells us, Pandora closed the box just in time to prevent the escape of Hope.

The Pandora myth is part of our cultural heritage. References to it are frequent; and it is familiar to those who read the prose and poetry of western civilization. But how many of us look more closely at what it is saying? According to this account, the original or "innocent" creation consisted of men. That was the intention of the gods for the world: that it be made up of a race of

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Janeway, *Man's World, Woman's Place* (New York: Dell, 1971).

men. Not until one of them oversteps himself and challenges the power of the gods does a woman enter the picture. Only then is she created in a purposeful act of punishment. Pandora is created as a curse for man; it is she who unleashes on the world the ills that the human community is heir to -- sickness, disease, enmity, warfare.

The point is that unexamined adherence to this myth shapes one's image of humanity; certain conclusions are inescapable in terms of the story. First, the real human being is man; woman is an afterthought designed as a curse to the man for the purpose of teaching him a lesson. Second, if the world is to be returned to its original design, it must be a world populated by men. Inasmuch as woman is the curse, her destruction will result in the eradication of the curse and a return to the "happiness" of the beginning. Finally, though it was not the woman's crime that brought on the anger of the gods, she is blamed for the evils that come into the world as a result of the crime. Moreover, it is quite possible to see in the "box" a sexual symbol, implying that contact with her leads to man's downfall. The Pandora story, then, encourages men to disavow responsibility for evil by blaming women for all the troubles that come to them. Further, because women are defiling, men must avoid them if they are to remain pure.

An analysis of this myth reveals its broad outlines of an androcentric vision of humanity. Only one sex is really human, it says, and that sex is male. The world originally belonged to men and when things are set right it will again.

But how does this myth shape our thinking and what are the implications of this myth for women? To imagine being human, then, is to imagine being male. It demands that women approximate, as closely as possible, a male way of being, for masculinity defines humanity. Thus a woman must strive to be as much like a male as she can be, to be fully human. But biologically,

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<sup>3</sup> I am depending on the retelling given by Herbert Spencer Robinson and Knox Wilson in *Myths and Legends of All Nations* (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1976), pp. 93-94.

this is an impossibility, and so the desires of women are doomed to be, in Sartre's words, a "useless passion." Women are made to feel nothing less than self-hatred for those passions. Only when women are freed biologically from the burdens of reproduction, can burn off their body fat, and develop their muscles and compete fairly for the world that belongs to those who are male by nature or by aspiration, so the variation on Pandora's myth instructs us, will the world be as it should be.

### The Coupled World

The second myth features a figure that has become increasingly familiar to us: the androgynous being, the one having within itself all that is now associated with the differentiated sexes. I will rely on Plato's *Symposium* for the outline of the story. There, the androgyne is but one of three original creatures.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes gives an account of the original human nature and what has happened to it. The sexes, he says, were originally three in number: there was man, woman, and the union of the two. In each case, the being was coupled: male with male, female with female, and male with female. It is the last which is the androgynous being. Each of the three beings was round, back and sides forming a circle; and each had four hands and four feet, one head with two faces, four ears, two privy members, and "the remainder to correspond." These beings were great in might and strength and they made an attack on the gods. To humble their pride and to teach them a bitter lesson, Zeus split them in two. After the division, each was half of the original nature and longed to find the other half in order to be whole again. This explains the phenomenon known as love, according to the *Symposium*: "...there is not a [one] of them...who would deny or would not acknowledge that this meeting and melting into one another, this becoming one instead of two, was

the very expression of [our] ancient need. And the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called love" [192a-193a].

"Innocent being," according to this mythical structure, consists in wholeness, in a union that results in self-sufficiency. The curse, then, is to be rendered half a person, a truncated being looking for the other half, longing for a coupling that will bring absolute fulfillment.

If one follows the logic of this imaginative variation on the real, there are consequences as well. In contrast to the Pandora myth, in the myth of the *Symposium*, femaleness is a dimension of being human in the original or innocent creation. For that reason, it is possible to say that femaleness partakes of the goodness of the original intention of the gods and in a way that is equal to maleness. According to this myth, the curse is that the individual man and woman is always only half a human. Androgynous beings seek their other half in union with the opposite sex and homosexual beings in union with the same sex, but no one is complete without a mate. According to the intentionality of the myth, completeness imaged on the model of the couple is the correction to the curse and the ideal state for human beings. Where that imaginative model is embraced, human desire will be directed toward the dissolution of the self in a new being that is both coupled and complete. Furthermore, if one tries to imagine the proper relationship between men and women according to this Platonic myth, one sees that there are only two options: either coupling to form an androgynous whole or total separation in a unisex world.

Though there is much in this myth to think about with regard to current questions of homosexuality, my main concern here is with the figure of the androgyne. There is a modern psychological version of this mythical figure that is currently exerting great influence on our contemporary culture and presents a very different human ideal. According to it, the task of each human being is to realize the "shadow side of the self" in such a way that the female develops all

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<sup>4</sup> Plato, *Symposium* 189a-194a.

the male potentialities of her being and the male, the female potentialities of his. Perhaps it is the influence of contemporary individualism that has led us to this pass, but the contemporary version longs not so much for union with another who completes as to be complete within and by oneself. In that way, there will be no need of another. One can be autonomous, independent, free.

There must be ways in which men feel the pressures of this mythical ideal in today's society. I think particularly of the young, some of whom are affecting a self-consciously androgynous style such as that epitomized by Michael Jackson. What I am more acutely aware of, however, is the pressure on women to have it all and to do it all. It takes its most dramatic form in the case of career women who impregnate themselves by artificial insemination, carry the baby to term, earn the livelihood for both of them, make a home, raise the family, provide for old-age, and find their self-identity in needing help from no one. There are less dramatic versions, to be sure. The point is, however, to espy the operative image of humanity that is at work.

To imagine being human according to the pattern of the androgynous myth is to imagine being complete, either by coupling or by self-realization. It is to aspire to a life in which we have it all. Maybe the failure of the heterosexual couple-front to deliver on its promises, especially the promises so ardently proclaimed in the 1950s, has led us to the highly individualized version of the myth of the completely androgynous human being. Whatever be the case, it is alive and well in our popular culture.

### The Communal World

It is often most difficult to deal with that which is the most familiar to us. Such is the case with the third myth I wish to discuss -- the myth of Eve and Adam. Efforts to bracket previous interpretations of the myth as a myth of male domination and to look at the myth structurally as we

have the others under consideration, helps us to re-read the story of Eve and Adam in a very new and revealing way.

This story, according to Genesis 2:5-3:24, is a drama of human creation in two acts. The first act is set in the time before what has come to be called "the fall," the vision of the world as it was intended to be. This first act, then, depicts the innocence of creation according to God's plan. In the second act, after the fall, the curse wrought on innocent Paradise derives, not from the will of God, but from what humankind has wrought over against God's will.

In Act 1, God calls into being the whole universe through the power of the creative word. Then God forms the man out of the dust of the earth and, seeing his loneliness, brings before the man all the living creatures that God makes. The man, however, sees none that can be a partner to him so God forms, not a new and distinct being (not another from the earth), but one taken from the man's rib and built up into a woman. It is this one, the woman, who elicits from the man the cry, "This at last is bone from my bones, and flesh from my flesh!" (2:23 Jerusalem Bible).

In this myth of the fall, women are imagined in some strikingly different ways than in the other two myths I have discussed earlier. Not only does the woman appear before the curse also belong to the "innocence" of creation, in contrast to the Pandora myth; but she and the man are also there as individuals, in contrast to the man, the woman or the androgyne in Plato. The woman is given to the man as a blessing, and it is clear from his reaction that the man receives her as such. The man recognizes himself in her, yet she brings something the man did not have by himself. At the same time, the image given is not of a coupled being with four arms and legs, etc. Each one, man and woman, is formed directly by God and each is an individual capable of saying "I" and of addressing a "thou."

In the second act of the drama profound changes are introduced into this relationship. The woman entertains the image of God proffered by the serpent and acts on it, eating of the fruit that has been forbidden to them.\* When the man, too, eats some of the fruit at the hands of the woman, "the eyes of both" open and, in short order, they attempt to shirk responsibility for their actions before God. Then the curse falls.

Inasmuch as punishment designates responsibility, each of the actors in the drama is held accountable. The serpent, the woman, and the man are each cursed in turn. The serpent will crawl the earth in the dust, the woman will know pain in her labor to bring forth children, and the man will know pain in his labor to subdue the earth. These results are familiar to students of the great Jewish myth. But buried in the curse to the woman is a line long neglected and of great significance. "Your yearning will be for your husband, yet he will lord it over you," the woman is told (3:16 Jerusalem Bible).

Now there is no doubt that the myth bears traces of earlier attitudes. The androcentric accent is apparent in the point of view from which the story is told: the man is created first; the woman is taken from the man; the woman is given to the man; and the man blames the woman for his failing. It is possible to hear the androgynous accent as well in the biblical image that a "man leaves his father and mother and joins himself to his wife, and they become one body" (2:25 Jerusalem Bible).

But at the level of structure it is clear that there is something new at work. First, the loss of innocence is the result of an act on the part of the woman and the man. Only when each has acted does the drama of the curse begin, and each one shares in it. The woman in this story then, is seen as a moral agent and held responsible for the state of the world. Second, only after both have yielded to temptation does there appear an indication that one has power over the other. God utters

the fateful words that; foretell the experience of women from generation to generation; "he will lord it over you" and subsequently, Adam names Eve.

But what is the significance and implications of this story for humanity? I have argued that each of the myths gives access to a longing for something different in the world relative to the issues of man and woman. The Pandora myth directs the imagination to a world free of women; the myth of the androgyne, to a self-sufficient being that includes all that we know as male and female. The story of Eve and Adam reveals a desire which leads us in a very different direction; it leads us to dream of a time when there was communion between two separately created and differently embodied beings who had something to give, each to the other, and something to receive, each from the other. This communion was a gift of their bond with God. Only when that was broken, did communion turn to conquest and difference to biased preference.

There is great hope in the dream behind the myth of Eve and Adam. It in no way indicates that one way of being is better than the other, more constitutive of humanity than the other, in itself a curse for the other. Nor does it say that one sex is exempt from responsibility for the condition of the world. Differentiation, far from being something to be overcome, is to be delighted in for it is believed to belong to the created order and to contribute to the possibilities for communion. In fact, only if it is mutually delighted in can the curse of "lording it over" be removed and communion restored. The Hebrew scriptures give a vivid rendering of what that mutual delight is like in the incomparable *Song of Songs*. But that mutual delight is a gift of being in a right relationship with God. And, if the myth is to be believed, that right relationship demands trust in God's word, even when it takes the form of a "no" that sets limits on human freedom.

How, then, shall we imagine being human according to the model of the myth of Eve and Adam? It is not to be male. And it is not to be complete in oneself, either by coupling or by

individual self-development. To be human is to be in communion with another and with God. To be human is to belong to something greater than the individual self or even the androgynous being accomplished through the union of male and female in coupling. To be human is to exist in a community of persons in which the uniqueness of the self is respected and contributed to the whole, while the deficiencies and limitations of the self are overcome in yielding to the whole.

The greatest challenge to a "re-thought" vision of Genesis today comes from an earlier myth -- the ideal of androgyny. Androgyny, as I see it, promises a wholeness based ultimately on the model of the individual. A single female/male being is the ideal. That being is imagined as having been lost through a curse that punishes each "part" of the being in the same way: by separation from that which completes it. When the curse is overcome, male and female together will constitute a single "I," and, according to my way of imagining, that will make for a great sameness in being: an infinite number of androgynes. Where it is not accomplished, there exist truncated persons, leading a half life while searching for the other half.

How different from this is the story of Eve and Adam. Each is created individually; each is tempted and falls as an individual; each receives a punishment that respects that individuality. But at the same time, the "we" that was constituted by their being given to each other suffers as well. It is not only the individuals who will suffer, then, but the relationship between them. Inasmuch as the curse introduces, for the first time, the notion of "lording it over," I think it legitimate to imagine that the originally intended relationship is one of mutuality, reciprocity, respect. This is why I term it communion, for it is an experience of union that preserves the "I" in the "we." The "I" is taken up, it is not suppressed or extinguished or even given up. But the introduction of the language of force, of power, of superiority, of hierarchy destroys the possibility of this mutual relationship.

Paul Ricoeur demonstrates in *The Symbolism of Evil* that the Adamic myth, as he calls it, preserves the tension between the experience of evil as act and as state, as something originated by human freedom and something which human freedom finds outside itself and to which it yields. In a similar way, I am arguing that the story of Eve and Adam preserves the double truth that humanity is reflected equally in the female and the male way of being and realized fully only when each contributes what is one's own to the relationships that constitute the whole. When either way of being is devalued, not considered revelatory of humanity, relationships of mutual respect become impossible.

It is, of course, still tempting to read the story of Eve and Adam as ultimately a myth about coupling, as Plato's androgyne myth is. But to do that is to miss the interpretative key given in the new Eve and the new Adam topology suggested in sacred scripture and subsequently developed by Christian theology. The new Eve and the new Adam are not sexual mates. The "one flesh" between them is, rather, that of mother and son. The trajectory of the story of Jesus and Mary, however, leads not to a reversal of the "lording it over" so that now the woman is in the power position. Instead, the mutual corrections recorded in the gospels result in a transformation of the natural relationship: ultimately, the son and the mother become brother and sister in hearing the word of God and keeping it. This latter represents as well the normative relationship in the community that will be known as church.<sup>5</sup>

To read the story of Eve and Adam in the light of the good news of Jesus Christ, then, is to see revealed in its contours the saving truth that man is called to be a son of God and woman a

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<sup>5</sup> One of the best homilies I have ever heard was given by a married permanent deacon in Baltimore. It was the feast of the Holy Family and this family man reminded the congregation that the purpose of the Christian family is to develop individuals to the point where they can enter into relationships of equality, respect, and mutual self-sacrifice -- becoming brothers and sisters in the Lord. What is true of the domestic church, the family, must also be true for the ecclesial family, the Church.

daughter of God. When faithful to this vocation, they are brother and sister to each other, no matter what other natural or social roles are theirs.

## Conclusion

I said at the beginning that it is both a requirement and a call to imagine being human. To belong to a community is to allow oneself to be shaped by its ways of imagining and to carry that work of imagining forward by critical interpretations and correct applications. I have shown three different ways of identifying what is wrong with the current situation regarding women and men based on three different ways of imagining the original or "innocent" creation and I've indicated what each of those ways of imagining portends for the future.

It is not possible, of course, to build a theology on a companion of myths and mythological types. But it is possible to arrive at insights about what distinguishes one tradition from another and, beyond that, to receive what Ricoeur has called a "non-violent appeal" to the imagination. For those whose commitment is to the truth revealed by the story of Eve and Adam this has special meaning.

As a Church concerned about the contemporary manifestations of self-hatred on the part of women, we must undergo a thorough examination of conscience, asking where and how the Church itself is guilty of an exaltation of the male over the female or of perpetuating images of the woman as essentially defiled or defiling. This will take great courage, for it will necessarily introduce us to the subterranean link between attitudes toward women and attitudes toward sexual pleasure and the whole sexual dimension of human being. I remember hearing a student at a college Church say once how disgusting he thought it was that a pregnant woman was giving out communion. He was

a young man, yet the attitudes that barred women from the sanctuary for centuries were alive in him.

I believe in the gift of celibacy for the reign of God and think that it is possible to have healthy attitudes toward sexuality and be celibate. But at the same time, it must be acknowledged that the defense of male celibacy has all too often involved an androcentric world view and a sexist theology. On the other hand, female celibates who embrace uncritically the imagery of the contemporary movement for the liberation of women at times fall prey to a reversal that is gynocentric, but still sexist in theology. Man haters are no more capable of telling the good news than woman haters. The good news is that God's love leaves no one out.

No less injurious to the truth about human beings is the wide-spread attitude that without a sexual partner one must remain half a person for the rest of one's life. I wonder to what extent the acceptance of this world view, rooted in the anthropological ideal of homosexual or heterosexual coupling, accounts for the crisis of faith among so many who had committed to celibacy. At the same time, I suspect that this world view has contributed to the rising divorce rate. Thinking of oneself as half a being and expecting an "other" to complete life in such a way that there is no need of additional relationships -- not even of children -- must necessarily end in disappointment, if not despair. Yet equally misleading, it stems to me, is the psychological ideal of making oneself all things to oneself.

The challenge for the Church, then, is to bring forth a community in which no one is excluded, each is valued, otherness is respected and taken delight in, and all points of view have a way to be heard. This does not mean that anything goes. Brothers and sisters owe each other mutual correction and mutual forgiveness in love. They owe each other as well that testing of each other that leads to greater individual and familial strength, the experience of power meeting power that

shapes a world greater than the sum of the parts. In and through the experiences of this kind of community, they become a new creation.

In this regard, I believe that a right imagining of the relationship between women and men requires a new and daring meditation on the relationship between the new Eve and the new Adam, and on our belief about what it means to be human. Using all the pain and all the promise coming from our current struggles with sexuality, relationships between the sexes, family and ecclesial structures, we need to ponder the mystery of graced humanity as revealed to us by Mary and Jesus.

Children are often a wonderful guide to this kind of meditation. Let me illustrate with a story. It was told to me by a Sister who teaches religion to the very poor in New York City.<sup>6</sup> Her technique is to read a story one day and have one of the children tell it back the next day in his or her own words. The day before, the story read had been the wedding feast at Cana and now one of the toughest kids in the class raised his hand to tell it back. "Jesus and Mary and some friends went to this here party," he began. "And Mary said to Jesus, 'They ain't got no wine.' So Jesus says, 'Well hell, it ain't my party.'"

Not only is that the best translation of the Greek that I have ever heard, it is fraught as well with points for meditation. What happened to change the attitude reflected in "What is that to thee and me?" or "Well hell, it ain't my party"? For change he did, from one who seemed intractable in the judgment that the hour had not come to one who stunned them all with quantities of wine for the wedding.

The child cuts through centuries of biblical interpretation that taught us to imagine that Mary is asking and Jesus answering, Jesus is leading and Mary following. A careful examination of the whole story in the light of the child's insight shows that the opposite is true. It is Mary who

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<sup>6</sup> How I wish I could remember her name, but cannot. Let her stand, then, for all the unnamed women who have passed on the faith to children in ways that activated their imaginations.

states a fact and Jesus who asks a question. It is Mary who takes the initiative and Jesus who follows her lead. But mere reversal of roles does not really capture the truth of John's meditation on the new age, the "seventh day," the second creation. Rather, what we have portrayed for us in the story of the wedding feast is a kind of mutuality where leading and following, requesting and granting are no longer appropriate terms. Mary and Jesus (the "woman" and the "man") interact with one another, listen to one another, respond to the situation in living awareness of the other's perception -- and in this way each contributes what each has and is. The result of this mutuality is that the "hour" is recognized, power is released, and the situation is not only saved but made merry.

So much in our world and in our Church cries out for a taste of the wine of mutuality. There are shortages, and great need and momentous expectations. Some of us are called to the courage required to correctly name the situation and the patience necessary to withstand the initial judgments that none of this concerns us, the hour has not yet come. If we would learn from the Woman, it must not be a caustic courage nor a passive patience: we must be willing to prepare the way and to count on what is best in the other. Those others, however, are asked to undertake the hard task of examining whether the judgment about the hour betrays a failure to remember what we were taught in the family of the faith: we can never say, "Well hell, it ain't [our] party." If we would learn from the new Man who is Jesus, then the capacity for change must be part of our life together, as must the capacity for prodigal generosity on the part of those who hold the power.

We must all be ready to "imagine being human" -- to imagine for ourselves possibilities of change -- we who believe that water can be changed into wine. But in this time before the "hour" there is a lesson to be learned: only an interaction where faith meets faith, power meets power, initiative sparks initiative will save us from being trapped in our mythically bound "roles." Women and men, clergy and laity, pope and people must mirror the loving and free interaction of Mary and

Jesus. Then we will recognize the hour when it comes and act in ways that will bring a divine response to the guests of our world; and that which is grace will be much, much more than we expect or deserve.

Mary Aquin O'Neill, RSM, Ph.D.

Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women

Baltimore, Maryland

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