

Aneta Gawkowska, Ph.D.

Chair in Sociology and Anthropology of Custom and Law
Institute of Applied Social Sciences
University of Warsaw

Katedra Socjologii i Antropologii Obyczajów i Prawa
Instytut Stosowanych Nauk Społecznych
Uniwersytet Warszawski

The Importance of Receptivity in Christian Anthropology New Feminist Case Study¹

“What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Corinthians 4:7) This rhetorical question asked by St. Paul in his Letter to the Corinthians may sound like a simple argument for human modesty and gratitude towards the Creator. In epistemological and anthropological terms it may, however, hide a meaningful message which strikes against the modern tendency to distrust what is received and value only what is created by oneself. Starting from William of Ockham, developed by Rene Descartes and Immanuel Kant, autonomy became the most highly cherished value understood as divorced from the good – created and received – therefore heteronomously

¹ This text is a longer and modified version of the presentation delivered at the XVII World Congress of Sociology in Göteborg, Sweden (July 11–17, 2010) under the title *Priority of Receptivity over Productivity According to New Feminism*.

imposed. This mainstream way of perception in modernity was precisely detected by Catholic theologians who were faithful to the old realist school of thought, which did not believe in the divorce between free will and the good. Servais Pinckaers, O.P., and W. Norris Clarke, S.J., persuasively described the misguided route of modern thinking which wanted to be self-sufficient and ended up being concentrated on human productivity, while ignoring the primary aspect of receptivity and inspiration by the goods which exist independently of human action².

Quite recently this kind of argumentation, which brings new life to the realist view on human perception and activity, has been taken up by the new feminists. They aim to develop a new social movement inspired by John Paul II and rely on his theology of woman and relation between men and women (theology of the body)³. The movement is still present more in theory than in practice (at least if by practice we understand self-conscious, organized, group activity). However, their theoretical arguments, no only in my opinion, already deserve interest. A male theologian, who has been involved in the development of new feminist thought, for a long time, is Fr. Francis Martin. I mention his name not just to prove that new feminism is not restricted to a women-only club but also to show that his critical analysis of the traditional feminist standpoints has been going along the same line of call for the forgotten receptive side of the human being, so particularly connected with the feminine. A year before John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium vitae* suggested that women should create new feminism, Fr. Martin published his book discussing the theoretical background of various streams of feminist thought. Among many valuable arguments he also concentrates on receptivity: "Having

2 Cf. Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington, D.C., 1995; *The Universe as Journey: Conversations with W. Norris Clarke, S.J.*, ed. Gerald McCool, Fordham University Press, New York 1988.

3 More on the subject of new feminism can be found in my overviews of the movement and the arguments of its representatives: *Nowy feminizm - poszukiwanie esencji kobiecości*, in: "Societas/Communitas" nr 2 (6) 2008, pp. 67-85; *New Feminists and Their Vision of Rights and Law*, in: "Societas/Communitas" nr 1 (7) 2009, pp. 239-248; *O tych, które pragną Wszystkiego. Teologia ciała, nowy feminizm, nowy humanizm?*, in: *Antropologia filozoficzna - inspiracje biblijne*, ed. Marian Grabowski, Andrzej Słowikowski, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, Toruń 2009, pp. 167-180; „Niewiaścę dzielną któż znajdzie?” (*Prz 31, 10*) *Etyka cnót kobiecych według nowego feminizmu*, in: *Współczesna etyka cnót: możliwości i ograniczenia*, ed. Natasza Szutta, Wyd. Semper, Warszawa 2010, pp. 277-296.

been obliterated from an understanding of the act of knowledge itself and ignored in the way we think of our relating to God, receptivity has become the enemy of autonomy. The result is a sense of shame that is all the deeper because it appears to be a diminution of what is authentically human. From this has come that distortion of masculinity which identifies it with coercive power. [...] When causality is identified with power rather than with generosity, then receptivity can be nothing else but passivity and not creative response. This is a caricature of the Christian view of God [...]”⁴. Martin notes that receptivity is a feminine dimension present in all human beings. He thus precisely presents the outlook of the later created new feminism which embraces the view of human nature embodied in two complementary, not conflicting ways in male and female versions of humanity, where the essence of femininity or masculinity does not make any spiritual or intellectual quality exclusively present in persons of one sex and opposed to representatives of the other sex. This does not mean that certain qualities cannot be associated with the essence of one sex or the other. Such is the case with receptivity. “Since women literally embody receptivity, a loss of esteem for this dimension of humanity as a whole led to a loss of esteem for women”⁵.

Pia Francesca de Solenni devoted her Ph.D. thesis in theology to trace the sources and causes of this loss of esteem for receptivity. She became one of key figures in the new feminist movement, where receptivity finds its rightfully respected place (besides constituting the motive of de Solenni’s book, receptivity is highly valued, particularly in the writings of Michele M. Schumacher, while it is implicit in others which I do not mention here for lack of space). The rest of my paper will focus on this one aspect which has been interestingly uncovered lately for Christian anthropology by new feminists. I will mainly concentrate on the logic of arguments studied by Pia de Solenni in her doctoral thesis published in 2000 under the title *A Hermeneutic of Aquinas’s Mens Through a Sexually Differentiated Epistemology. Towards and Understanding of Woman as Imago Dei*. My aim is to inform the readers

4 Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question. Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 196. I would like to thank Fr. Jarosław Kupczak O.P. for the inspiration to study Francis Martin’s thought.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 197.

about the case of the recovery of pre-modern outlook in the new guise, as well as to ponder the question of the vitality of this recovery.

As I mentioned in my introduction, one can safely say that modernity in general puts a lot of stress on productivity, largely devaluing the receptive, contemplative or repose/leisure side of our existence. Opposed to this modern imbalanced view of human nature, agency, and activity, the new feminists claim that a balanced view of human nature is both more attractive and more adequate. They try to look for the sources of the skewed outlook and they identify it in the Cartesian view of dualism of mind and body, in the priority given to the activity of the human mind (while disregarding the role of the human body), and in the misguided view of the human mind as predominantly productive rather than at least equally receptive.

De Solenni claims in her book that since the time of Descartes the Western world has been ignoring the receptive functions of the mind and putting too much stress on its productive aspect, which started the problematic overemphasis put in modernity on the human productivity in all practical areas of activity. The famous Cartesian statement “I think, therefore I am” effectively taught us to perceive thinking solely as a creative factor, even founding our very selves. “Since the time of Descartes, reason’s role in an almost mechanical acting upon reality has been emphasized at the expense of the intellect’s receptive activity of uncovering the truth of reality. In modern philosophy we have also neglected the consideration of passivity or receptivity as virtuous qualities. Along with this development in epistemology and philosophy there has been a parallel development of feminist philosophies which seem to go further and further away from who woman is and focus more and more on making her like a man or even a neuter creature”⁶. Why does de Solenni link the Cartesian tendency to view the productive mind with the anti-feminist views of nominally feminist modern theories?

She claims that the two aspects of the mind (*ratio* and *intellectus*, respectively responsible for the productive and the receptive activity) used to be valued equally by premodern scholars, most notably by St. Thomas Aquinas. She both follows and develops his ideas, claiming that the two

6 Pia Francesca de Solenni, *A Hermeneutic of Aquinas’s Mens Through a Sexually Differentiated Epistemology. Towards and Understanding of Woman as Imago Dei*, Pontificia Universitas Sanctae Crucis, Romae 2000, p. 13.

aspects of the mind were perceived as equal in importance for the proper functioning of the human, just like the cooperation of men and women, equal in dignity and complementary in human nature, is essential for society⁷.

The argument of Aquinas stated that men and women have the same type of the soul, therefore both of them have passive and active elements in it. Their intellectual activity also involves passive acceptance of the first principles, too, though they differ in the sensual aspects of knowing the world⁸. In a sense, Solenni, following Aquinas's anthropology, identifies the creative and receptive aspects of the mind, respectively, with the particular sex. However, while *ratio* seems to be closer to the masculine essence, and the *intellectus* has something closer to the feminine essence, both are present in the mind of humans. Moreover, both need to be developed by men and women. She writes: "Although woman is said to personify *intellectus* in a certain way, it would be absurd to maintain that women have the perfection of *intellectus*. Like men, woman must develop this capacity for knowing. If she is associated with the virtues of *intellectus*, we could say that man is associated with the virtues of *ratio*. Such an association in no way diminishes either man or woman. Both have an imperfect *mens*. [...] The dichotomies of activity and receptivity which are applied to man and woman are not absolute determinations of what masculine and feminine nature is, but they are indications of certain qualities which each tends to possess"⁹.

The modern alienation of women, according to this perspective, thus resulted largely from the early modern philosophical suppression of an essential part and function of our mind and perception of the world; from ignoring its receptive aspect. "Prior to Descartes' radical break from the passive intellect, there were both the active and the passive powers working together to understand, to know. With Descartes' split, not only does woman lose her identification with the mind, but man also loses the identity with the receptive which is necessary for advance in knowledge"¹⁰. Later she writes as follows: "The Cartesian system [...] does away with any notion of complementarity in the faculty of the mind or in the ways that men and

7 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 154.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

women might come to know. Since Descartes rejects the body, he leaves only the mind to define the human person. Leaving only the mind, he takes away one of the essential aspects of the mind: the intellect. What is left is the reason. Reason represents all aspects of the mind which define the person. Resultant from this, man and woman are equal and the same. Aquinas, for one, never denies that they are equal. He does, however, assert that they are different. The Cartesian system is unbending in its reductionist approach to the human person. [...] What was feminine is abandoned and woman must conform to a purely masculine humanity. Furthermore, man is robbed of the complementarity that he can learn from woman and, in a sense, he becomes unbalanced”¹¹. Hence, we might guess, that the appearance of those feminist movements which continue the Cartesian overemphasis of the productive mind does not really promote women but actually forces women to be like men, exclusively production-oriented, alienated from their essence, and even solidifying the overall human alienation from its nature. More broadly speaking, the Cartesian imbalance contributes to the anti-ecological standpoint of contemporary humanity, which has proved to be obsessed with changing the world rather than respecting it as a gift and natural good.

Solenni claims that John Paul II’s theology of the body allows the thought of Aquinas to be developed¹². Being a new feminist herself, inspired by his thought, she seems to go along similar lines when she states that both understanding and realizing the human as such requires an understanding of who woman is. In both John Paul II’s and de Solenni’s writings this argument is drawn from the importance of the figure of Mary – according to the Biblical perspective – so far the only purely human being fully realized by receptive response to Divine Love with big L¹³. Solenni writes: “The current understanding of receptivity is generally not laudatory. Yet, the language of Scripture imitates the language of a bride receiving her groom to illustrate the relation of every human soul before God. This does not mean that every human being is essentially feminine. Rather it indicates that there is something particularly feminine that all human beings are called to imitate”¹⁴.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 167; Cf. John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 4.

14 Pia Francesca de Solenni, *A Hermeneutic of Aquinas’s Mens...*, op. cit., p. 12.

“Perhaps the response of the soul to God is something that woman is able to teach man”¹⁵. Similar appraisal of the feminine act of *reception* can be noticed in the late Pontiff’s teaching (thus presenting his anti-Cartesianism): “In the Church every human being – male and female – is the ‘Bride’, in that he or she accepts the gift of the love of Christ the Redeemer, and seeks to respond to it with the gift of his or her own person”¹⁶. Earlier in the same paragraph he writes: “In this way ‘being the bride’, and thus the ‘feminine’ element, becomes a symbol of all that is ‘human’, according to the words of Paul: ‘There is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28)”¹⁷.

It seems to me that such an outlook is interestingly attractive not only for anthropological discussions about sex/gender issues but also for contemporary social debates on leisure and work as the former seems to be in constant need of its legitimation in modernity, at least in the modern West, but probably also in other parts of the globalized social world. Whenever we work, we are praised. Whenever we have some rest and relaxation, we need to excuse ourselves, and permanently catch up with the supposedly “lost” time. It seems that it’s one of examples of cases where a social problem is the indirect effect of the misguided anthropological view from the past: workaholism is the sad result of the several hundred years’ long promotion of imbalanced view of human mind. Similar is the case with the above mentioned sex/gender issues debated in theology, anthropology and social sciences: the contemporary mainstream preference to use the term “gender” instead of “sex” (or even exclude the latter from social vocabulary) seems to be the effect of the early modern fear that anything given by nature is restrictive of the human freedom to create oneself. What we are largely left with in late modernity is the insecurity of our identity as well as obsession with activity, productivity, and self-creation ignoring the truth of the fact that the material we work on is given, received, while the gift does not destroy but rather enables the ability to create on some solid basis. Therefore, it may be claimed that receptivity valued by Christian anthropology and brought back to the center of attention recently by the new feminists seems to be a vital issue which may rescue the insecure modern

15 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

16 John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, 25.

17 *Ibid.*

humans from despair over their supposedly lost identity and their lost touch with the world. De Solenni reminds the despaired ones: “[R]emoving the receptive element reduces the intimacy the knower has with the object of its knowledge. The intimacy is an element which is connected to the taking in of the form. In this way, the knower receives the object”¹⁸. Once we change our way of perception of ourselves and the world, once we recall that what we know comes largely from what exists and is accepted within us, thus becoming intimate, things may not be that gloomy. Let me thus end with a quote from another new feminist, Michele Schumacher, who challenges the modern people to reverse the trend by in a sense compensating the long ignored side: “Great is the challenge of developing a new feminist ethic [...] [M]ore practical concerns [...] are, however, best discerned in a properly contemplative fashion, which is to say that priority is awarded to receptivity over activity [...]”¹⁹.

Doniosłość receptywności w antropologii chrześcijańskiej. Studium przypadku nowego feminizmu

Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje argumenty na rzecz priorytetu receptywności wobec produktywności, jakie zawarte są w nowym feminizmie. Nowy feminizm to stanowisko teoretyczne i praktyczne, posiadające też pewne cechy ruchu społecznego, które opiera się na założeniach antropologii chrześcijańskiej, a w szczególności inspirowane teologią kobiety zaproponowaną przez Jana Pawła II. Nowe feministki, np. Pia Francesca de Solenni czy Michele M. Schumacher, krytykują nowożytną kartezjańską wizję umysłu jako przesadnie akcentującą jego aspekt twórczy oraz dewaluującą aspekt kontemplacyjno-receptywny. Aspekt ten łączą one z pewnych powodów z kobiecością (choć obecny jest w mężczyznach i kobietach), a jego wykluczanie lub dewaluację postrzegają jako ważny powód dyskryminacji kobiet w nowożytności oraz przejaw niewłaściwego ujęcia antropologicznego ludzkiej podmiotowości. Nowe feministki w zaskakujący często dla współczesnych odbiorców sposób dowodzą, że bardziej zrównoważony obraz człowieka i jego umysłu, jaki obecny był w erze przednowożytnej (np. u św. Tomasza z Akwinu), był bardziej adekwatnym opisem rzeczywistości niż ujęcie kartezjańskie, a zatem postulują one przywrócenie receptywności należnego jej w antropologii miejsca.

18 Pia Francesca de Solenni, *A Hermeneutic of Aquinas's Mens...*, op. cit., p. 160.

19 M. M. Schumacher, *An Introduction to a New Feminism*, in: *Women in Christ. Toward a New Feminism*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, p. XVI.