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SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AND THE VATICAN: A LACANIAN RESPONSE

I. INTRODUCTION

In June 2019 the Congregation for Catholic Education released a document entitled "Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education." Written on behalf of the Congregation for Catholic Education the document purports to "guide and support those who work in the education of young people."[1] Authors Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi and Archbishop Angelo Vincenzo Zani warn of the dangers of gender theory, arguing that it has created a society where sex is separate from gender and sexual differences are devalued in favor of a sexually egalitarian world. The Congregation for Catholic Education, a long-standing institution founded in 1588 and that has been revised various times under several popes, aims to oversee the education of ecclesiastical persons and in all schools, "of any order and grade," that instruct lay people.[2] As such their instruction is wide-ranging and far-reaching. Furthermore, it is in line with Catholic doctrine espoused by Pope John Paull II, Pope Francis, and Pope Benedict. Both the fear and the vagueness of the Vatican's understanding of gender ideology are echoed in Versaldi and Zani's document. Judith Butler summarizes the situation: "gender is understood as a single 'ideology' that refutes the reality of sexual difference and that seeks to appropriate the divine power of creation for those who wish to create their own genders. . .. There seems to be no interest in what the complex and conflictual field of gender and sexuality studies actually includes."[3]

Quoting Pope Francis, the authors explain that gender theory "denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family."[4] Versaldi and Zani contend that this has led to a variety of non-heterosexual orientations, transgender identity, and non-monogamous relationships. Sexuality is presented as a "fundamental component of one's personhood" that provides the origin of three levels of one's identity – biological, psychological, and spiritual – which they see as important for the individual's subsequent maturity and ability to contribute

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[1] Giuseppe Versaldi and Angelo Vincenzo Zani, "Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education," (2019. Vatican City. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/index.htm), 4-5.

[2] Details of the history of the institution are available on its website. See http://www.educatio.va/content/cec/en/congregation-for-catholic-education/history.html

[3] Judith Butler, "Anti-Gender Ideology and Mahmood's Critique of the Secular Age." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 87, issue 4 (December 2019): 957.

[4] Versaldi and Zani, 3.

to society.[5] This article investigates each level of the Catholic vision of identity by examining it with psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of human reality.

To explain how a human subject operates in the world, Lacan developed a complex three-layered model that accounted for the perception and meaning of images, signification, and aspects of reality that are ultimately unknowable. These he named the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, referring to these as "the three quite distinct registers that are essential registers of human reality."[6] Lacan likened this model of reality to a quilt, one whose layers are held together by various stitches or quilting points (*pointe de capiton*) that knot together signifiers to the signified, thus creating meaning.

Like Versaldi and Zani, Lacan thought of sexual difference as the foundation for the development of personhood; however, unlike the Vatican authors, Lacan did not suppose that sexual duality was a God-given component of our identity. Indeed, Lacan argued that "the two sides, male and female, of sexuality are not given data, are nothing that could be deduced from experience."[7] Instead, the subject is formed in relation to the symbolic field of signifiers, a field that precedes the subject and by which the subject is formed in an encounter with cultural systems of meaning. By linking the proper signifiers to what is signified, the subject shares in the social world of the symbolic. The symbolic, or what neurologist Lisa Feldman Barrett calls "social reality," is the fundamental aspect of all human existence:

> "This sort of social reality, in which two or more people agree that something purely mental is real, is a foundation of human culture and civilization. Infants thereby learn to categorize the world in ways that are consistent, meaningful, and predictable to us (the speakers), and eventually to themselves. Their mental model of the world becomes similar to ours, so we can communicate, share experiences, and perceive the same world."[8]

Much of Lacan's understanding of our thoughts and actions within the social world concern how we categorize the world in terms of sexual identity.

For Lacan, sexual identity is formed in fearful response to the symbolic law of sexual difference. By answering the law, one takes a position in the symbolic order thereby submitting to the authority of the symbolic and gaining identity through recognition as a subject. This authority is described by Lacan as the *nom-du-père*. The double-meaning of the term, which, when spoken in French, can be understood to be both the "no" of the father and the "name" of the father, refers to the subject's development

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[5] Versaldi and Zani, 4.

[6] Jacques Lacan. *On the Names-of-the-Father,* Trans. Bruce Fink, (Malden, MA: Polity, 2013), 4.

[7] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956, T*rans. Russell Grigg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 248.

[8] Lisa Feldman Barrett, *How Emotions are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain (*New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 99.

in terms of law and language. The subject's identity is formed in and through language (the *non-du-père*) and by accepting the authority of the father (the *nom-du-père*). The biblically-based discourse from the various Vatican authors align natural aspects of sexual identity with supernatural narratives, thus producing an ideology sanctioned by a divine father. Physical and spiritual aspects of existence are knotted together to produce hierarchical positions of father and mother in the Catholic imagination. Lacan's insights into the production and operation of these taxonomies reveal how power and fear are used to create these seemingly natural positions.

This paper investigates each aspect of the authors' arguments in conjunction with Lacan's three registers. The first section addresses the natural and supernatural claims of the Vatican authors that address biological aspects of sexual identity, such as sexual dimorphism, by considering Lacan's understanding of the real and how taxonomic categories are created. The second section compares the Vatican authors' claims regarding the psychological needs for a sexual difference in the family to Lacan's understanding of the mirror stage and identity formation. The third section analyzes the Vatican's claims regarding the societal and spiritual need for sexual difference by utilizing Lacan's understanding of the quilting point and the role religion plays in creating power and meaning. The final section examines Lacan's concept of the veiled phallus to grasp why gender theory is such a threat to the Vatican's position on sexual difference. Lacan's theories expose the ideological motivations behind the Vatican's insistence on sexual dimorphism and their insistence on the "natural" positions of male and female.

II. SENSING THE REAL

Versaldi and Zani contend that one of the reasons gender theory is a problem is because it makes "a radical break with the actual *biological difference* between male and female."[9] The authors turn to the story of Genesis to explain the divine origin of sexual dimorphism, that is, the idea that humans are born as one of two physical forms: "Christian anthropology has its roots in the narrative of human origins that appears in the Book of Genesis, where we read that 'God created man in his own image [. . .] male and female he created them (Gen. 1: 27).'"[10] In addition to the creation story of Genesis, Versaldi and Zani state that sexual dimorphism is evident throughout the human body, maintaining that sexual difference has a natural, biological origin: sexual dimorphism "can be demonstrated scientifically by such fields as genetics, endocrinology and neurology."[11] This sentiment is echoed in Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* where he declares that "the fundamental fact of human existence at every stage of history is that God 'created them male and female.' He always created them in this way and they are always such."[12] People who

[9] Versaldi and Zani, 12 (emphasis in original).

[10] Versaldi and Zani, 17.

[11] Versaldi and Zani, 13.

[12] Pope John Paul II, *The Redemption of the Body and the Sacramentality of Marriage (Theology of the Body)* (Rome: L'Osservatore Romano. Rome, 1974-1984), 47.

identify outside of the binary framework are belittled as nothing but a "provocative" display while third genders are dismissed as a "fictitious construct."[13] Finally, people who are born outside the binary of male and female, that is, people with disorders of sex development (DSD) are eliminated with the help of the medical establishment: "*medical science* should act with purely therapeutic ends, and intervene in the least invasive fashion, on the basis of objective parameters and with a view to establishing the person's constitutive identity."[14]

Versaldi and Zani's dismissive attitude towards transgender people, non-binary gender systems, and people with a DSD, indicates an inability to address bodies and systems that disrupt the normative classification of male and female. The need to downplay the instances where sexual dimorphism and the alignment of sex with gender is not present indicates the vulnerabilities of the system, a fact that Bruce Lincoln observes in his analysis of taxonomies: "Anomalies remain always a potential threat to the taxonomic structures under which they are marginalized, for in the very fact of their existence they reveal the shortcomings, inadequacies, contradictions, and arbitrary nature of such structures."[15] In the following section, I examine Lacan's order of the real and the function of taxonomy in order to understand how bodily anomalies threaten the binaries of the sex classification system.

Lacan separates reality, the coherent sense story that we make, from what he terms the real. Such a distinction is useful given that the reality we experience is only a fraction of what is actually present. We can only see certain wavelengths of light, we can only hear within a certain range of frequencies, we can only detect certain smells. Lacan brings attention to this in *Seminar XVII*: "In the light spectrum there is an ultraviolet that we have no perception of – and why wouldn't we have any? At the other end, infrared end it's the same. The same goes for the ear – there are sounds that we stop hearing, and no one can tell very well why it stops there rather than further on."[16] Lacan explains that our experience of reality is like that of a filter which allows only fragments of the real to enter: "Something sifts, sieves, in such a way that reality is only perceived by man, in his natural, spontaneous state at least, as radically selected. Man deals with selected bits of reality."[17] Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux explains that is the result of the evolution of the various systems of the brain: "The brain, for example, does not have a system dedicated to perception. The word 'perception' describes in a general way what goes on in a number of specific neural systems – we see, hear, and smell the world with our visual, auditory, and olfactory systems. Each system evolved to solve different problems that animals

https://d2wldr9tsuuj1b.cloudfront.net/2232/documents/2016/9/theology_of_the_body.pdf

[13] Versaldi and Zani, 13-14.

[14] Versaldi and Zani, 13 (emphasis in original).

[15] Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: comparative studies of myth, ritual, and classification* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1989), 166.

[16] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis,* Trans. Russell Grigg, (New York. NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 47.

[17] Ibid., 47.

face."[18] With our limited sensory system, we are, as brain researcher David Linden says, "'peering through a keyhole' into sensory space."[19] Our knowledge of perception reveals that not only is our sensory system detecting only a part of the world but that it is also incapable of detecting the whole of it. Access to the whole of reality is, as Lacan writes, impossible: "since the opposite of the possible is certainly the real, we would be led to define the real as the impossible."[20]

Michael Pastoureau's history of the color blue demonstrates the impossibility of the real. Unlike red, a color used by prehistoric humans, blue has a relatively short history. It is not until the 15th to 17th century, when technological advances made the pigment accessible, that blue emerged as a dominant color. Prehistoric human societies did not produce blue. The rarity of blue in ancient cultures means that they did not include it in their color schemas: "no ancient author mentions the color blue. For both the Greeks and the Romans, there was no blue in the rainbow."[21] Ancient color schemas have three to five colors listed in their spectrum of the rainbow.

To a person born into a world that includes blue, it is hard to imagine anything else when encountering the sky on a sunny day. Blue seems to be an objective reality, yet, as Barrett makes clear, this is mere illusion. While our brain tells us there are stripes of distinct color -- red, orange, yellow, and so on -- there is, in reality, only "a continuous spectrum of light, with wavelengths that range from approximately 400-750 nanometers. This spectrum has no borders or bands of any kind."[22] Despite this, we perceive distinct bands of color. Barrett asks why this is so:

> Why do you and I see stripes? Because we have mental *concepts* for colors like 'Red,' 'Orange,' and 'Yellow.' Your brain automatically uses these concepts to group together the wavelengths in certain ranges of the spectrum, *categorizing* them as the same color. Your brain downplays the variations within each color category and magnifies the differences between categories, causing you to perceive bands of color.[23]

This is particularly evident when comparing a culture that has distinct concepts for green and blue, versus a culture that does not have blue and consequently includes blue as an aspect of green. In other words, not all rainbows have the same number of stripes. Color is a concept created by the perceiver. Barrett gives the example of experiencing roses in a botanical garden: "Your brain downplays the differences between the members of a category, which as the diverse shades of red roses in a botanical garden, to

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[18] Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1998), 16.

[19] David J. Linden, *The Accidental Brain: How Brain Evolution Has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, and God* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 92.

[20] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts*, Trans. Alan Sheridan, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton C& Company, 1998), 60.

[21] Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 31.

[22] Barrett, 84.

[23] Ibid., 84.

consider those members equivalent as 'red.' Your brain also magnifies differences between members and nonmembers (say, red versus pink roses) so that you perceive firm boundaries between them."[24] Thus, Barrett concludes, when your brain is categorizing, "You are not finding similarities in the world but *creating* them."[25]

To understand the color blue, one must understand the society that created it. The culture creates a symbolic category by carving out a space for the color blue. This creation of a taxonomical space is similar to how Lacan's commentators have understood the real. According to Jacques-Alain Miller, it is "a kind of excluded interior or an intimate exterior" while to Charles Shepherdson it is a "void within the structure."[26] Lacan explains the real through the comedy of the humble macaroni: "Everyone makes jokes about macaroni, because it is a hole with something around it, or about cannons. The fact that we laugh doesn't change the situation, however: the fashioning of the signifier and the introduction of a gap or a hole in the real is identical."[27] Macaroni are a structure around a gap; similarly, our experience of reality through symbolic categories allows partial access to an otherwise unknowable real.

The creation of a symbolic category and the brain's need to magnify differences reveals how taxonomic systems work to produce social reality. Pastoureau explains that in order to understand color, we must consider that "the artist, the intellectual, human biology, and even nature are ultimately irrelevant to this process of ascribing meaning to color. The issues surrounding color are above all social issues."[28] The experience of blue, like the experience of seeing bands in a rainbow, is part of the historical, social fabric we accept as reality. In contrast, in the real, no blue exists, nor do bands of color exist in the rainbow. Likewise, for Lacan, sexuality has no pre-given meaning, no natural connection to social categories. Like Pastoureau, Teresa de Lauretis explains this phenomenon by use of social reality:

> It isn't until it becomes (i.e. until it is signified as) a boy or a girl that it acquires a gender. What the popular wisdom knows then, is that gender is not sex, a state of nature, but the representation of each individual in terms of a particular social relation which pre-exists the individual and is predicated on the *conceptual* and rigid (structural) opposition of two biological sexes.[29]

The various voices of the Vatican assert that sexual dimorphism is natural. Indeed, the Catechism of the Catholic Church lists one of the articles in the

[24] Ibid., 87.

[25] Ibid., 92 (emphasis in original).

[26] Charles Shepherdson, *Lacan and the Limits of Language* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 2-3.

[27] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis,* Trans. Denis Porter, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 121.

[28] Pastoureau, 10.

[29] Teresa De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory Film and Fiction (Theories of Representation and Difference)* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 5 (emphasis in original).

profession of faith as belief in humanity that is "created male and female." This is even though one in two thousand births or 1.7% of the population is born with atypical characteristics, not to mention DSDs that are not visually evident at birth. There are over thirty different types of DSD, each of which manifest in chromosomes, gonads, internal genitals, and genitalia in various ways. The complexity of the natural world is nowhere in evidence in Versaldi and Zani's article. Consider Versaldi and Zani's statement regarding chromosomes: "male cells (which contain XY chromosomes) differ from the very moment of conception from female cells (with their XX chromosomes."[30] In Versaldi and Zani's view, chromosomes only come in two possibilities: XY for male and XX for female. In reality the dizzying array of karyotypes, such as XO, XXY, XYY, XXYY, XXX, XXXY, XXXXY, XYYY, XYYYY, XXXYY, XXXX, and XXXXX, considerably complicate this binary.[31] In addition, cases of chimerism, a rare form of DSD where a person has both XY and XX present, destabilizes the underlying assumption that every body has a determining chromosomal identity in the first place.

Furthermore, Versaldi and Zani's claim that sexual dimorphism is evident from "the very moment of conception" is refuted by the development of the fetus. During the initial few weeks of conception, all embryos are the same. In the early stages of fetal development, embryonic gonads contain undifferentiated cells and therefore have the potential to become testes, ovaries, or, more rarely, a combination of the two. Similarly, all mammalian embryos begin with the same internal urogenital duct structure that allows for the development of Wolffian ducts in typical males or Müllerian ducts in typical females. In neonatal development, reproductive organs and genitals are formed from the same basic structures that remain undifferentiated until six to eight weeks. Depending on hormones, Müllerian ducts can become fallopian tubes, the uterus, and the upper vagina. Conversely, the Wolffian ducts can become epididymis, vas deferens, and seminal vesicles of typical males. Finally, and most significantly for this discussion, there is the genital tubercle which can become either a clitoris or a penis, or somewhere between the two.

Having a penis or lacking a penis is the usual way one determines sexual identity, yet the reality is more complex. The existence and use of the Prader Scale reveals just how indistinct the line is between a penis and a clitoris. When is a genital tubercle a small penis, as in cases involving micropenises, or a large clitoris, as in cases of clitoromegaly? Conceived by endocrinologist Andrea Prader, the Prader Scale is a way to measure the amount of virilization present in the genitals. A Prader Scale of 1 is a "normal" female while 5 is a "normal" male. Through use of this scale, along with inspection of the genitals, classification of the organ occurs. A well-defined line between penises and clitorises is, however, muddied by the variations in measurement standards used to separate the two. The definition of a micropenis, for example, varies from 2.5 to 1.5 centimeters, depending on whose scale you use.[32]

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[30] Versaldi and Zani, 12.

[31] Julia A. Greenberg, *Intersexuality and the Law* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 13.

[32] Katrina Karkazis, *Fixing Sex: Intersex, Medical Authority, and Lived Experience (*Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 103.

Like the bands in a rainbow or the color blue, sexual difference is not simply cultural or natural. Just as the social world creates meaning for how the human eye perceives a certain wavelength of electromagnetic radiation, our social world likewise makes meaning of biological reality, similarly minimizing differences and creating distinctions. The impulse to create distinction between the sexes becomes apparent when one considers how similar male and female bodies really are. In fact, all of humanity is rather similar. Myra Hird points this out clearly: "at the chromosomal level, while no two people (except for identical twins) have the same chromosomal constitution, all humans share 99 percent of their chromosomes. The differences which we hold so dear (hair color, skin tone, and so on) and on which so much of our social organization is based . . . are miniscule in comparison with our biological similarities."[33]

The Judeo-Christian understanding of the sexual dimorphism present in the story of Adam and Eve has led to "unconditional support for surgical interventions, as early as possible, aimed at making the unacceptably ambiguous bodies of intersexed infants and children conform to the dichotomous model in which there is no room whatsoever for ambiguity" despite the prohibition on removing gonads in Deuteronomy 23.1.[34] This inability to accept the natural diversity of bodies is evident in "Male and Female He Created Them" when the authors advise that, "in cases where a person's sex is not clearly defined, it is medical professionals who can make a therapeutic intervention . . . intervene in the least invasive fashion, on the basis of objective parameters and with a view to establishing the person's constitutive identity."[35] While this statement suggests that there are "objective parameters" to determining a person's identity, there are currently no universal guidelines for such interventions. More importantly, the assignment of a child's "constitutive identity" is not possible to determine. Depending on the particular DSD, between five and forty percent of people end up rejecting the sex they were assigned.[36]

The current medical paradigm works to suppress and erase these bodies by allowing them to exist only after medical correction and subsequent conformity to the two-sex system. Judith Butler has observed that bodies are only allowed to "live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" while bodies that fall outside of this norm are considered "unthinkable, abject, unlivable."[37] Medical care operates with the assumption that abnormalities must be removed in order to render these "unlivable" bodies acceptable. Julia Epstein remarks that "individuals with gender disorders are permitted to live, but the disorders themselves are rendered invisible, are seen as social stigmata to be excised in the operating room."[38] Versaldi and Zani's insistence on the naturalness of the

[33] Myra Hird, *Sex, Gender, and Science (*New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 44.

[34] Sally Gross, "Intersexuality and Scripture." *Theology and Sexuality* 11, 65-74 (1999): 68.

[35] Versaldi and Zani, 13.

[36] Human Rights Watch, *"I Want to Be Like Nature Made Me;" Medically Unnecessary Surgeries on Intersex Children in the US* (2017), 58. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lgbtintersex0717_web_0.pdf

[37] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1993), xi.

[38] Quoted in Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: transsexualism, technology, and the idea of gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 75.

alignment of sex and gender, combined with their dismissal of bodies that do not conform to the system, suggests that this is not, as Raewyn Connell writes, "a naïve mistake about what biology can explain or not explain" but rather "a highly motived ideological practice which overrides biological facts."[39] This sentiment is stated powerfully in an interview with an intersex man: "Our lives highlight the problem that sex is really about power – it doesn't matter how many sexes there are, the number doesn't matter. It's about power. And as a result of how that power is inflicted on our bodies."[40]

III. THE IMAGINARY, THE SYMBOLIC, AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

In this section I explore the role vision plays in identity formation for Lacan, Versaldi, and Zani. Versaldi and Zani's insistence on heterosexual modeling by one's parents is based on the idea that a child must see a heterosexual family in action. Lacan's registers of the Imaginary and the Symbolic complicate this simplistic model of seeing by separating the roles images play in an animal's understanding of its self and the world from the human world where one's identity is formed not through one's family but through the register of the Symbolic.

Versaldi and Zani begin their argument by insisting on the naturalness of a heterosexual orientation. Versaldi and Zani write that the differences of male and female form a "natural reciprocity,"[41] while Pope Benedict XVI describes it as a "pre-ordained" duality that "moves each one towards the other mutually."[42] Pope John Paul II's use of the natural (the body and its desires) and the supernatural (the Creator) combine in his description of conjugal act: "The fact that they become one flesh is a powerful bond established by the Creator. Through it they discover their own humanity, both in its original unity, and in the duality of the mysterious mutual attraction."[43]

In addition to this innate heterosexual orientation, Versaldi and Zani claim that the heterosexual relations must also be modelled by the parents within an acceptable family structure. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines a family heterosexually: "a man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children form a family."[44] Versaldi and Zani argue that a child's proper sexual development depends on a heterosexual marriage: "In the family, knowledge of one's mother and father allows the child to construct his or her own sexual identity and difference."[45] It is within the family that "children can learn how to recognize the value and the beauty of the differences between the two sexes; along with their equal dignity and

[39] Raewyn W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 246.

[40] Human Rights Watch, 20.

[41] Versaldi and Zani, 11.

[42] Quoted in Versaldi and Zani, 19.

[43] Pope John Paul II, 27.

[44] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993): 1882-2202. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM

[45] Versaldi and Zani, 14.

their reciprocity at a biological, functional, psychological and social level."[46] One's sexuality, in body and mind, is seen as being tied to sexual orientation and thus to the use of one's genitals within the procreative confines of a sanctioned union. Marriages and unions that are non-procreative or non-monogamous are seen to pose a threat to society itself. Pope Francis states firmly that "no union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society."[47] Versaldi and Zani warn of the dangers of same-sex marriages and non-monogamous relationships, both of which threaten the nuclear family model and deny the child "the right to grow up and mature in a correct relationship represented by the masculinity and femininity of a father and a mother."[48] The concern for the cognitive development of children, that is the ability of children to witness "correct" sexual difference, provides one of the main reasons for why the authors stress the importance of heterosexual marriage.

While the Vatican looks to the future of society to make their argument, Lacan's understanding of human sexual identity turns to the evolutionary past by considering the role of vision in the sexual development of animals. Lacan's second register, the imaginary, refers to the entire realm of images that structure the creature's relationship to itself and to its world. Lacan contends that the imaginary is key to understanding the maturation of sexual identity: "in the animal world, the entire cycle of sexual behavior is dominated by the imaginary."[49] To demonstrate this, Lacan analyzes a study on pigeons, the basis for his theory of his most famous theory of the mirror stage. The experiment, conducted by L. Harrison Matthews, controlled for external stimuli by keeping the birds in solitary confinement for a month. Later the birds were exposed to either another pigeon or a mirror: "Two birds were confined in adjacent cages separated by a sheet of glass, and single birds were confined by themselves but provided with a mirror. The birds were thus supplied with companions to which they had no tactile access."[50] Matthews's data showed that while isolated female pigeons do not reach maturity while being confined, somatic change in a female pigeon's gonads does occur if a mirror is placed in the cage.

Like a pigeon, seeing an image of oneself plays a key role in the formation of the ego in the human being. Lacan's theory suggests that the child, upon seeing its body reflected in a mirror, mistakes and misrecognizes the mirror image for its self. This is Lacan's famous mirror stage; however, its name is a misnomer: it is not a stage that we pass through, but rather it is a condition in which we live. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit argue this persuasively when they write, "we don't 'move beyond' the mirror stage;

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[46] Ibid., 21.

[47] Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia (On Love in the Family*) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016): 41-42. https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf

[48] Versaldi and Zani, 21.

[49] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954,* trans. John Forrester, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 138.

[50] Leonard Harrison Matthews, "Visual Stimulation and Ovulation in Pigeons," *Proceedings of the Royal Society B – Biological Sciences,* 557-560 (1939): 557.

its self-misrecognition [is] the preconditions of all object relations."[51] Despite being a fictional or hallucinated image, the effects of it on the subject are quantifiable. In experiments conducted on *Macaca nemestrina*, a monkey otherwise known as the southern pig-tailed macaque, Giacomo Rizzolatti and his colleagues found mirror neurons that explain the misrecognition of self with other. These are neurons that fire whether the monkey performs or observes an action. In other words, whether a monkey holds a cup or watches another (human or monkey) hold a cup, the same neuron fires. Rizzolatti concludes that "mirror neurons are neurons that internally 'represent' an action," thus we learn by watching, during which our motor neurons are activated, before we learn by doing.[52] Lacan's insight that "the sight alone of the whole form of the human body gives the subject an imaginary mastery over his body, one which is premature in relation to a real mastery"[53] is evident in the fact that "people who merely watch others practice a particular sport actually get better at that sport."[54] This mimicry starts well before we kick our first ball. Neurologist V. S. Ramachandran relates the results of a study by Andrew Melzoff, a cognitive psychologist: "He found that a newborn infant will often protrude its tongue when watching its mother do it. And when I say newborn I mean it – just a few hours old. The neural circuitry involved must be hardwired and not based on associative learning."[55] Evolutionary psychologist Pascal Boyer explains this surprising phenomenon in this way:

> Studies show that the brain areas that are activated when we see people's gestures, overlap with those activated when we actually act in a similar manner. In other words, there is some part of the brain that is imagining performing the action witnessed, although the plan is not made consciously and the motor sequence is inhibited.[56]

The unconscious imitative function of our visual-motor system allows an individual to have an image of oneself, an idea one's bodily outlines and potentiality for movement, or, to put it another way, one's place in the world.

It is clear how an image of another being like oneself, whether that self is a pigeon or a human, has significant somatic effects. Lacan, however, argues that an image of oneself acquires an entirely different meaning in the human realm than in the animal realm. While asserting that the image of one's own body "assumes enormous importance" in humans and animals, Lacan argues that they are profoundly different:

> The structuration of the world in the form of the *Umwelt* is accomplished through the projection of a certain number of

[51] Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 156.

[52] Giacomo Rizzolatti *et al*, "Premotor cortex and the recognition of motor actions," *Cognitive Brain Research* 3 (1996): 131-141.

[53] Jacques Lacan 1991, 79.

[54] Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought.* New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001), 105.

[55] V.S. Ramachandran, *The Tell-Tale Brain: A Neuroscientist's Quest for What Makes Us Human* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 127.

[56] Boyer, 104-105.

> relations, of *Gestalten*, which organize it, and specify it for each animal.
> In fact, the psychologists of animal behavior, the ethologists, define certain mechanisms of structuration, certain paths of discharge as innate in the animal. Its world is the environment in which it evolves, which weaves and separates out from the indistinctness of reality these paths which are preferred from the outset, to which its behavioral activities are committed.
> In man, there is nothing of the kind.[57]

Lacan sees the relationship between an animal and its world (*Umwelt*) as one of ideal fit. He uses the medical term "coaptation" to describe this: "In animals, knowledge is a coaptation, an imaginary coaptation."[58] Coaptation refers to the seamless joining together of two surfaces, such as the two lips of a wound being sewn together or the fitting together of two pieces of a broken bone. Lacan argues that this "perfect fit" between the animal and its *Umwelt* is the result of the evolution of the animal, a situation that he does not see in the case of humans.[59] Ramachandran notices this same discrepancy between animals and humans:

> A fish knows how to swim the instant it hatches, and off it darts to fend for itself. When a duckling hatches, it can follow its mother over land and across the water within moments. Foals, still dripping with amniotic fluid, spend a few minutes bucking around to get the feel of their legs, and then join the herd. Not so with humans. We come out limp and squalling and utterly dependent on round-the-clock care and supervision. We mature glacially, and do not approach anything resembling adult competence for many, many years.[60]

Lacan maintains that the difference between humans and animals begins with the way the imaginary differs. The animal's fit with their particular *Umwelt* is perfect while the human's development is characterized by a marked lack of adaption because of the way the image of self is understood. When an animal, such as a pigeon, sees an image of itself or another one of its species it works to "define it as a member of a species rather than an individual."[61] Because of this, Kaja Silverman argues it is more appropriate to call the mirror stage a "window stage" for non-human animals because the image acts "more as a window than a mirror – it opens onto the other, rather than the self."[62] This ability to imagine ourselves in the eyes of another, is key to understanding the human subject. Lacan uses the idea of a picture to explain his understanding of self-consciousness. The picture has "the function in which the subject has to map himself."[63] This map is what allows us to "*see myself seeing myself.*"[64] Like mirror neurons that allow us to

[57] Lacan 1991, 168.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Ibid., 137.

[60] Ramachandran, 117.

[61] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1983), 41.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Lacan 1998, 100.

[64] Ibid., 80 (emphasis in original).

feel what another feels, it is through having a map, a picture, that allows us to imagine oneself from the point of view of another: "It is in the space of the Other that he sees himself and the point from which he looks at himself is also in that space."[65] Like Lacan, Ramachandran argues that this ability to imagine seeing oneself being seen is an essential component of self-consciousness: "As a collar to adopting the other's point of view, you can also see yourself as others see you – an essential ingredient of self-awareness. This is seen in common language: When we speak of someone being "self-conscious," what we really mean is that she is conscious of someone else being conscious of her."[66]

Lacan explains this phenomenon by relating a personal story from his youthful days spent upon a fishing vessel: "Petit-Jean pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me – *You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!*"[67] The story of the sardine can demonstrate the consequences of being a subject in the symbolic: we realize that we are an object in others' field of vision. We experience ourselves in a picture, an object seen by the gaze of others. Much like Michel Foucault's discussion of the prisoners of Jeremy Bentham's all-seeing Panopticon, Lacan's subject is viewed by eyes that one cannot see: "I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides."[68] It is for this reason that the sardine can, which is certainly without eyes, looks at Lacan all the same. Lacan observes this in his reflections on Petit-Jean's joke: "To begin with, if what Petit-Jean said to me, namely, that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same."[69] The combination of our need to both communicate with others, or as Lacan would say, to be recognized by the other, and our awareness of being watched by others, results in the symbolic order acting like a web where all meaning is determined by this dimension: "One can only think of language as a network, a net over the entirety of things, over the totality of the real. It inscribes on the plane of the real this other plane, which we here call the plane of the symbolic."[70]

Unlike Versaldi and Zani who see sexual identity as the result of innate heterosexuality and the exposure to familial role models, Lacan argues that one's sexual identity is neither the result of one's body or constitution, nor is it due to one's personal family. Sexual identity is not a component of one's identity but rather one's identity is formed in response to the law of sexual difference: "Everything that's said, expressed, gestured, manifested, assumes its sense only as a function of a response that has to be formulated concerning this fundamentally symbolic relation – *Am I a man or am I a woman?*"[71] Judith Butler points out this important aspect of Lacan's understanding of sexual identity: "over and against those who argued that

[65] Ibid., 144.

[66] Ramachandran, 128.

[67] Lacan 1998, 95 (emphasis in original).

[68] Ibid., 72.

[69] Ibid., 95.

[70] Lacan 1991, 262.

[71] Lacan 1997, 171.

sex is a simple question of anatomy, Lacan maintained that sex was a symbolic position that one assumes under the threat of punishment."[72] One's sexual identity is a position that one assumes under threat in exchange for meaning. Unlike Freud, who understood the Oedipus complex as the child's confrontation with the father over access to the mother, Lacan understood "father" and "mother" to be positions in a discourse based on the Oedipus complex. "Mother" and "father" signify cultural positions, and hence have no necessary correlation to biological realities.

In this way Lacan revised Freud's theory of incest to become "a law governing the unconscious organization of human societies."[73] It is thus understandable then, that the child's encounter with the Name-of-the-Father has little to do with one's actual father – "the signifier 'father' has no relation whatever to the physical fact of any individual father"[74] – and everything to do with the various ways one encounters the Name-of-the-Father, that is, through "demands, taboos, sanctions, injunctions, prohibitions, impossible idealization, and threats."[75] "Father" is a signifier that is linked to other signifiers of power (such as the phallus, money, power, law) while one's actual father simultaneously lacks these attributes and is nonetheless connected to them by virtue of being male. Silverman contends that the "ideal father" attains institutional support not only in the patriarchal family but also in "legal, medical, religious, technological, and education systems, and the dominant political and economic organizations," all of which work to produce and sustain patriarchal order.[76] Like Louis Althusser's subject who turns in response to the police officer who yells "Hey, you there!," Lacan's subject, whether father or mother, is "identified with the subject of the speech and takes his or her place in the syntax which defines the subjective position."[77] Unlike animal development which exists outside of the symbolic dimension of language or Versaldi and Zani's model of human development which relies on a child watching its parents, Lacan's theory understands how power affects the individual within the symbolic and without one's family: to do "what one must do as a man or a woman" is to accept one's position within the discourse of the symbolic.[78]

IV. THE QUILTING POINT

Lacan's signifiers operate like chess pieces in that they are "differential elements, in themselves without meaning, which acquire value only in their mutual relations, and forming a closed order."[79] To explain how language operates, Lacan asks one to imagine two layers of discourse where the top

[72] Butler 1993, 95-96.

[73] Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan,* Trans. Barbara Bray, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1997), 212.

[74] Silverman, 164.

[75] Butler 1993, 106.

[76] Silverman, 184.

[77] Ibid., 215.

[78] Lacan 1998, 204.

[79] Sheridan in Lacan 1998, 279.

level is the level of language without meaning, what Lacan describes as "a confused mass in which appear units, islands, an image, an object, a feeling, a cry, an appeal."[80] Floating beneath that is the second layer made up of streams of words, which interact and make sense only in relation to one another. These two layers are held together by the quilting point, the mechanism which stops this "otherwise indefinite sliding of signification."[81] In the case of sexual identity, the quilting point is the Name-of-the Father.

Lacan conjures up the image of a button on a piece of furniture to emphasize the power of the quilting point: "The quilting point is the word *fear*, with all these trans-significant connotations. Everything radiates out from and is organized around this signifier, similar to these little lines of force that an upholstery button forms on the surface of material."[82] The knot of force (the Name-of-the-Father) and fear (the No-of-the-Father) that ties the quilting point is the knot of castration produced by the No-of-the-Father. Lacan turns to Freud to make this point:

> Why does Freud insist on the Oedipus complex? Why do we have here a knot that seems so essential to him that he is unable to abandon it in the slightest particular observation – unless its's because the notion of father, closely related to that of the fear of God, gives him the most palpable element in experience of what I've called the quilting point between the signifier and the signified?[83]

The Oedipus complex thus functions as a knot "instating in the subject of an unconscious position within which he could not identify with his ideal type of sex."[84] The father, a signifier closely related to the phallus, and thus to the power that maleness confers through association and connotation, is linked to fear, authority, and above all, the demand to conform to a binary sex system and in order to become a recognizable subject.

The relation of the father to power and authority is evident in Pope Francis's *On Love in the Family* where he details the oppositional roles of the mother and the father: while the father acts as a guardian, a protector watching over his wife and children, the mother "watches over her child" and "with tenderness and compassion" providing the child with a positive environment.[85] This, Pope Francis argues, in turn causes the child "to grow in confidence and to experience the world as a good and welcoming place." The father, in contrast, has the task of teaching the child hard lessons such as "perceiving the limits of life" and understanding that the wider world has "challenges" which will require "hard work and strenuous effort."[86] The father is described as a laborer whose efforts sustain the very existence of the family while the mother labors within her family earning "the praise

[80] Lacan 1997, 261.

[81] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English,* Trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 291.

[82] Lacan 1997, 268.

[83] Lacan 1998, 268.

[84] Lacan 2006, 271.

[85] Pope Francis, 133.

[86] Ibid.

of their husbands and children."[87] Complaints about this rather old-fashioned view of a woman's labor are addressed, and subsequently dismissed, by Pope Francis: "Nowadays we acknowledge as legitimate and indeed desirable that women wish to study, work, develop their skills and have personal goals. At the same time, we cannot ignore the need that children have for a mother's presence, especially in the first months of life."[88] The dangers to the child are heightened by Pope Francis's statement on the matter: "The weakening of this maternal presence with its feminine qualities poses a grave risk to our world."[89] Pope Francis thus uses the tactic of fear-mongering by placing the very well-being of our world upon a woman's identity and place being solely within the home.

In Pope John Paul II's discussion of the letter to the Ephesians, he expounds upon the famous lines "Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife and Christ as the head of the Church, his Body, and is himself its Savior. As the Church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands" (5:22-24):

> The husband is above all, he who loves and the wife, on the other hand, she is who is loved. One could even hazard the idea that the wife's submission to her husband, understood in the context of the entire passage of the Letter to the Ephesians (5:21-33), signifies above all the 'experiences of love.' This is all the more so since this submission is related to the image of the submission of the Church to Christ, which certainly consists in experiencing his love. The Church, as bride, being the object of the redemptive love of the Christ-Bridegroom, becomes his Body. Being the object of the spousal love of the husband, the wife becomes "one flesh" with him, in a certain sense.[90]

Women are here defined as the passive beloved body while men, the head of the body, are active lovers. This active/passive binary is extended to positions of power in Pope Francis's *On Love in the Family* where he expresses the need for a father's presence as the need for his authority.[91] A similar connection is clear in Versaldi and Zani's following essentializing statement that celebrates women for their relationship to those lacking power and agency: "Women have a unique understanding of reality. They possess a capacity to endure adversity and 'to keep life going even in extreme situations' and hold on 'tenaciously to the future.' . . . We can note that women are ever ready and willing to give themselves generously to others, especially in serving the weakest and most defenseless."[92]

The relationship between a woman's status in society and man's authority to grant that to her is evident in the husband's role in naming the child. In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is introduced as "the son of David the son of Abraham" (1.1) thus emphasizing Jesus's public identity in his

[87] Ibid., 18.

[88] Ibid., 131.

[89] Ibid., 132.

[90] Pope John Paull II, 237-238.

[91] Pope Francis, 134.

[92] Versaldi and Zani, 10.

world, conferred upon him by the name of his father, Joseph, himself identified in the text as "son of David" (1:20), thereby establishing the patrilineal line. This demonstrates the potential power of the No-of the-father, the power of Joseph to confer public status or shame, in the following passage:

> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus" (Mt. 19-21).

Joseph's yes gives a name and identity to Jesus and protection to Mary from public humiliation. Mary's yes, the yes to bear the child of the Holy Spirit, is the submission of one's private body to the supernatural authority of God the Father, while Joseph's yes speaks to the natural, public, political arena. Just as the Church is redeemed by Christ, Mary is delivered from shame by Joseph. The supernatural story of marriage is repeated on the natural level where marriage, besides having a private conjugal aspect, is a public ceremony that guarantees the public worth of one's partner: marrying another person is "to present him or her to society as someone worthy of unconditional love."[93] Pope Francis mirrors Mary's supernatural pregnancy to natural pregnancy by assigning authorship of the child to God, rather than the mother: "A mother joins with God to bring forth the miracle of a new life. Every child growing within the mother's womb is part of the eternal loving plan of God the Father."[94] In natural and supernatural discourses, women's access to subjecthood, authority, and authorship is only through male figures.

Bruce Lincoln's discussion of his childhood dining room is useful in understanding the way systems of difference work. In *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, Lincoln analyzes the taxonomic systems that were openly at work in the seating arrangement at the Lincoln family home. Bruce, his sister, mother, and father were all "aware, and at times remarked openly, that our dining arrangement provided a convenient map of the major family subsystems, for where the table bisected vertically, adults were divided from children; horizontally, males from females."[95] Like most patriarchal nuclear families, the Lincoln family table operated on two major systems – that of age and that of gender. These differences are more than binaries of young and old, male and female, rather, they are physical productions of ideology. The seating arrangement mirrors the power dynamics of society: "Rather, adults (i.e., those who possess the preferential age, that of majority) outranked children (those who lack it), and males (those who possess the preferential gender) outranked females. The result is a four-part hierarchic set, which in those days was commonly accepted as natural and right."[96] This hierarchy produces the system of haves and have-nots, the basis for creating the patriarchal system: "Within this system, age and gender function as taxonomizers, that is, each one establishes the basis

[93] Pope Francis, 99.

[94] Ibid., 127-128.

[95] Lincoln, 131.

[96] Ibid., 131.

for an act of discrimination through which all members of a given class are assigned to one of two subclasses: those who possess the trait or property in question, and those who do not."[97]

Likewise, Teresa de Lauretis argues that gender is best understood as "the representation of a relation, that of belonging to a class, a group, a category."[98] Sexual difference is not the result of the difference between male and female genitalia but rather, sexual difference becomes understood as that difference. Jacqueline Rose states this succinctly: sexual difference is "assigned according to whether individual subjects do or do not possess the phallus, which means not that anatomical difference is sexual difference (the one as strictly deducible from the other) but that anatomical difference comes to *figure* sexual difference, that is, it becomes the sole representative of what that difference is allowed to be."[99]

Like the seating arrangement that appears "natural and right," sexual difference appears as a natural category due to its relation to genitalia. The rules of signification are presented as being part of the natural order, an order that is legitimized and sustained by systems that are moral, medical, legal, social, political, and supernatural:

> Insofar as taxonomies are in part epistemological instruments, the claim is advanced that they make possible knowledge of the underlying patterns of the natural order. But insofar as taxonomies are also instruments for the organization of society, those patterns are extended to – better yet, imposed upon – social groupings, as the social module (whether explicit or not) is associated to the modules of the natural world, being treated as if it were but one more instance of a general cosmic law. More than legitimate, arbitrary social hierarchies are thus represented as if given by nature, and agitation again their inequities – which tends to come from those who have been subordinated and marginalized by these systems – is made to seem but the raving of lunatics.[100]

The dismissal of the complexity of sex and gender and the implication that any non-binary way of understanding sexual difference is simply "the raving of lunatics" is evident not only in Versaldi and Zani's article but also in the Catholic League's response to biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling's proposal for a five gender system. The authors, in a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* write, "It is maddening to listen to discussion of 'five genders' when every sane person knows there are but two sexes, both of which are rooted in nature."[101]

Not only are ideas outside of the system seen as irrational and unnatural but they are also seen as dangerous. Gender theory, the great threat that Versaldi and Zani perceive, has been compared by Pope Francis to nuclear

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[97] Ibid., 133.

[98] De Lauretis, 4.

[99] Jacques Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne,* Trans. Jacqueline Rose, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 42.

[100] Lincoln, 140-141.

[101] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000), 78.

arms and genetic engineering: "Let's think of the nuclear arms, of the possibility to annihilate in a few instants a very high number of human beings. Let's think also of genetic manipulation, of the manipulation of life, or of the gender theory, that does not recognize the order of creation."[102] The binary system that Versaldi and Zani present on natural and supernatural grounds is not only a system of male and female but it is also a taxonomy of differences where other binaries – subject/object, authority/submission, phallus/castrated, public/private, head/body, worth/shame – stitch the natural and supernatural together. Lacan's all-encompassing view of the subject within the symbolic means that we cannot escape these binaries. These are the words that are woven through our being, which we use to give meaning to reality. There is no meaning that isn't already religious, no viewpoint outside of religion, hence Lacan's claim that "meaning is always religious."[103] This is clear in *Seminar XXI* when Lacan chides his atheistic audience, saying "I know you're not believers, right? But that doesn't mean that you aren't all the more conned."[104] In his book *Lacan and Religion*, Aron Dunlap writes that while Lacan was not interested in creating an overarching theory of religion, he nevertheless accorded religion a central place in how humans understand reality; that is, not only does religion make meaning but it also predictively determines meaning: religion "provide[s] a unifying role within the psyche, providing meaning by determining at the outset what can and cannot be found."[105] Thus, religion is not just *an* illusion but it is *the* illusion that creates the shared reality of humans, an illusion so powerful that we are forever barred from discovering meaning separate from it. Lacan insisted that "even if you are not believers, you still believe in that aspiration [for the love of God]. I won't say that you suppose it; rather, *it supposes you*."[106] The power of religion lies in the fact that it "supports and underwrites our very structures of being, subjectivity and social interaction."[107]

Lacan declares that the function of mythology is to situate a subject in the world, to provide a way of orienting oneself. He asks, isn't it "clear that these mythologies are aimed at installing man, at placing him upright, in the world – and that they tell him what the primordial signifiers are, how to conceive their relationship and their genealogy?"[108] The use of Lacan's theories shows that the Vatican's organization of the world is an ideological naturalization of gender. As a patriarch of the Lincoln clan, Mr. Lincoln's authoritative position as eldest male at the table, links him directly to the position of father. In the same way, Lacan argues that none of us can escape the symbolic order that is founded on a patriarchal notion of power and authority. The signifier establishes both authority (the No-of-the-father) and

[102] Joshua McElwee, "Francis strongly criticizes gender theory, comparing it to nuclear arms," *National Catholic Reporter*. Feb. 13, 2015. https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/francis-strongly-criticizes-gender-theory-comparing-it-nuclear-arms

[103] Jacques Lacan, *Autres Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2001), 318.

[104] Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton, "The subject of religion: Lacan and the ten commandments," *Diacritics* 33 (2) 71-97 (2003): 71.

[105] Aron Dunlap, *Lacan and Religion* (Durham, UK: Acumen 2014), 4.

[106] Quoted in Reinhard and Reinhard Lupton 2003, 71 (emphasis in original).

[107] Ibid.

[108] Lacan 1997, 200.

authorship (Name-of-the-father) through a phallogocentric discourse that establishes identity and meaning on patriarchal terms. A Lacanian analysis of "Male and Female He Created Them" demonstrates how fathers, Christian or atheist, are symbolically linked to God the Father because of the power of the symbolic. Signifiers of masculinity are stitched to other signifiers, both natural and supernatural, through the fear and power of fathers, both divine and human.

V. THE PHALLUS IS VEILED

In "Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education," Versaldi and Zani offer a theory of sexual difference that is sexually dimorphic, God-given, and sees only heterosexual identities and desires wedded in a traditional hierarchical relation to each other. For Versaldi and Zani, sexual difference finds its ideal in the oppositional relationship of a submissive mother and an authoritarian father. Fathers, natural and supernatural, are invested with subjecthood, the power of authority and the power to name, while mothers, whether it be the Virgin Mary, the Church, or actual mothers, are seen as objects of submission whose identity exists only in relation to the father. Furthermore, not only do Versaldi and Zani argue that an individual's proper biological, psychological, and spiritual development rests upon this understanding of sexual difference but they also warn that the future of society itself is dependent on this narrow view. By grounding their argument in the Bible and using documents authored by various popes, Versaldi and Zani sanction their view of the natural world of diverse bodies by appealing to the power of supernatural authorities. Just as fathers govern over mothers and children in Versaldi and Zani's view, the narratives of the divine father police social reality.

Lacan's understanding of human sexuality differs greatly from the Vatican's. Lacan's model, being devoid of spirituality, of God-given attributes, of any innate sense of meaning, sees sexual difference as a biocultural system that creates the social reality within which we are formed. It also allows one to uncover the ideological underpinnings of that created reality.

Lacan argued that psychoanalysis "should not try to produce 'male' and 'female' as complementary entities, sure of each other and of their own identity, but should expose the fantasy on which this notion rests."[109] The fantasy that Versaldi and Zani espouse is one that is misogynistic and transphobic. It denies humanity to people who exist outside of the binary, torturing those people, psychologically and physically, in order to enforce the law of sexual difference, a difference produced by medical authorities and supported by these religious authorities. Lacan's insights into the production and operation of these taxonomies reveal how power and fear are used to create these seemingly natural positions.
For Lacan, meaning is something created by religion in its attempt to impose a symbolic order upon the world, as he states in the following provocative passage:

[109] Rose in Lacan 1983, 33.

> It took some time, but they [Christians] suddenly realized the windfall science was bringing them. Somebody is going to have to give meaning to all the distressing things science is going to introduce. And they know quite a bit about meaning. They can give meaning to absolutely anything whatsoever. A meaning to human life, for example. They are trained to do that. Since the beginning, religion has been all about giving meaning to things that previously were natural.[110]

Lacan's great revelation, according to Foucault, was that meaning itself is arbitrary: "Lacan, in the case of the unconscious, showed us that "meaning' was probably no more than a superficial impression, a shimmer, a foam, and that what was really affecting us deep down inside, what existed before us, and what was supporting us in time and space, was system."[111] The task of the Lacanian analyst is "to understand just how the system, which at first appeared to be autonomous, governed by the purely conventional and internal laws, nevertheless requires this peculiar object and requires that it have precisely this enigmatically "natural" status, the apparent and illusory "exteriority."[112] The system of sexual difference presented by the Vatican works by veiling the phallus of God, denying the link between maleness and power. Use of Lacan's theory allows one to draw back the veil on the Vatican's phallus, exposing its fraudulent nature. It reveals why the Vatican, from Pope John Paul II to Versaldi and Zani, have seen gender theory as such a threat.

Throughout the various texts I have discussed, God is explicitly referred to as male, whether as the Father, the Son, or simply as "he." Even the name of the highest position within the Catholic church is pope, or "papa" in Italian. Yet, as Pope Francis explains, God is beyond sexual difference: Those first pages of the Bible make a number of very clear statements. The first, which Jesus paraphrases, say that "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (1:27). It is striking that the "image of God" here refers to the couple, "Male and female." Does this mean that sex is a property of God himself or that God has a divine female companion, as some ancient religions held? Naturally the answer is no.[113]

The denial of the maleness of God, the supernatural authority, is also reflected in the fact that human authorities, such as Versaldi and Zani, speak through the Church, itself a female entity: "The Church, mother and teacher, does more than simply listen. Remaining rooted in her original mission, and at the same time always open to the contribution of reason, she puts herself at the service of the community of peoples, offering it a way of living."[114] By identifying themselves with the Church, and thus with submission, the authors veil aspects of maleness through which their authority speaks.

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[110] Jacques Lacan, *On the Names-of-the-Father,* Trans. Bruce Fink, (Malden, MA: Polity 2013), 64-65.

[111] Quoted in Roudinesco, 296.

[112] Shepherdson, 22.

[113] Pope Francis, 8-9.

[114] Versaldi and Zani, 17.

Lacan's understanding of the phallus as a velied object is helpful when analyzing the ability of the Vatican's writers to call God male explicitly while still insisting that "he" is beyond sexual difference. In "The Signification of the Phallus," Lacan writes that the phallus "can play its role only when veiled, referring to the Dionysian initiation rites where a secret object, an erect phallus lying in a winnowing basket (a *liknon*), was revealed to the initiate during the mystery rites of the ancient Greco-Roman world.[115] The meaning of Dionysos's veiled phallus is enhanced by understanding the god's ambivalent identity. While he was part of the Greek pantheon, Dionysos was also thought to be a foreigner. He was experienced by his followers in the eating of the flesh of wild animals and in the drinking of cultivated wine. He was symbolized in overtly masculine ways such as the form of a bull or a phallic pillar. At the same time he was known for his womanly dress and hairstyle, as well as his effeminate conduct. The initiate who experiences the divine rites of Dionysos's mystery cult was given a chance to see the true form of the god, one which is denied outwardly by Dionysos's feminine nature and hidden by a veil in depictions of initiates with the *liknon*.

Like the hidden phallus of Dionysos, the signifier of the phallus "works by denying itself."[116] By this denial it "appears to precede symbolization and guarantee its basis in nature, but in fact a by-product of the structure itself."[117] Rather than seeing how the supernatural narrative is imposed upon nature, nature itself is only understood through the lens that the supernatural narrative provides. The inability to see beyond this narrative is the power of religion, a force so powerful that Lacan states that "we can't even begin to imagine how powerful [it] is."[118]

In Juliet Mitchell's introduction to the Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality*, she observes that psychoanalysis should not subscribe to ideas of how men and women do or should live as sexually differentiated beings, but instead it should analyze how they come to be such beings in the first place."[119] Gender theory, the focus of "Male and Female He Created them," threatens the Vatican's understanding of sexual difference because denaturalizes the link between sex and genders and cuts the stitches that bind the natural and supernatural. Lacan's work allows one to "lift[] the veil" on biblical taxonomy, revealing that sexual difference is an arbitrary system that creates meaning by stitching masculinity to the phallus by force and fear.[120]

[115] Lacan 2006, 581.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Shepherdson, 25.

[118] Lacan 2013, 64.

[119] Mitchell in Lacan 1983, 3.

[120] Lacan 2006, 581.