

Mutual Vulnerability? Asymmetric Relationships in Biblical Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: The 2019 PBC document views relationships between parents and children, masters and servants, “shepherds” and “the flock,” civil authority and citizens as *asymmetric*. The structure of the document suggests that these relationship systems are based on shared human experience and a common theological foundation: they appear to repeat the pattern of the parent-child relationship and originate in the obligation to obey God. Using the document as a starting point, I would like to outline what the concept of asymmetric relationships can mean today. In search of common perspectives, I will compare New Testament texts with the interpretation of asymmetry in today’s social ethics discourse. The inequality and asymmetry of different persons and groups seem to be an undeniable fact, causing tension that can be resolved fruitfully by parties who take responsibility for each other in the presence of a “third.”

KEYWORDS: vulnerability, asymmetric relationships, reciprocity, obedience

Pope Francis spoke at a theological symposium in Naples on 21 June 2019, addressing the issue of the desirable renewal of theology in the spirit of the apostolic constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*.¹ He emphasised, among other things, that today’s theology must strive in particular for an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach. Thus, on the one hand, the self-serving seclusion of theology or the theologian can be avoided. On the other hand, such an approach will enable theology, like many other disciplines, to reassess its traditions in a spirit of compassion and attention to our fellow men and to make these traditions useful to others.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission published a document on the image of man in the Bible on 16 December 2019.² The paper also addresses a wide range of human sciences and invites them to work together to communicate and make use of the values of the biblical message that are as relevant today as ever. From the multitude of possible

1 The text of the speech is available at: “Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,” https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_teologia-napoli.html [access: 29.12.2021].

2 Pontifical Biblical Commission, «*Che cosa è l'uomo?*» (*Sal 8,5*). *Un itinerario di antropologia biblica*, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20190930_cosa-e-luomo_it.html [access: 29.12.2021].

topics and approaches, I would like to draw attention to the points that summarise, under the heading “asymmetric relationships,” the parallel relationships between parent and child, master and servant, shepherd and flock, “citizen” and social leader, as described in the Pauline epistles (*IAB* 230–234; *cf.* 235).³ As democratic Western societies witness the widespread questioning and rearrangement of power structures, more specifically, in light of the painful experiences of child maltreatment and the abuse of religious power, this subject is particularly topical.

This paper is divided into three parts. First, I will outline the complex picture that the Biblical Commission document presents of these systems of relationships by briefly describing the textual background, conceptual approach and theological context of the issue. Second, I will explain the socio-philosophical meaning and context of the concept of “asymmetric relationships.” Third, I will make suggestions as to the direction in which the contemporary validity and validation of the biblical message can be sought in light of the socio-ethical and educational-theoretical contexts outlined. The first step will be a close reading of the Biblical Commission document section in question; the second tries to summarise recent developments, relying on scholarly papers, whereas the third is necessarily fragmentary.

1. “The Pastoral Instructions of the Apostolic Tradition” (*IAB* 230–234) and Their Context in the Biblical Commission Document

Chapter 3 of the Biblical Commission document is entitled “The Human Family,” and section 3.2 describes “the love between parents and children.” It is worth recalling that the first section of this chapter is about “the love between man and woman,” while subchapter 3.3 concerns the “love of brothers and sisters.” The section on love between parents and children is thus in an intermediate position, and this arrangement gives us an insight into the structure of the whole document. Chapter 1 understands and originates man from his relationship with God. Then Chapter 2 links man’s relationship with the garden, that is, nature, to God’s order. Finally, Chapters 3 and 4 present human relationships as the origin of the process of life and history in a biological, cultural and political sense. One of the fundamental features of the document is the philosophical-theological position that the nature and origin of reality are correlative. This basic approach reflects the way prehistory is understood today. Furthermore, it is also recurring as a guiding principle in the document whose structure can be described as “genetic”: the elements of reality unfold from one another.

Chapter 3, section 2 on “love between parents and their children” goes a long way in following the biblical text. First, it mentions the biblical genealogies and circumcision, the unique roles of fathers and mothers and the general picture of love between parents

³ The text of the document is referred to by the numbering of paragraphs in the document.

and children (*IAB* 209–215). Then it discusses the duties of parents and children towards each other according to the law (*IAB* 216–221), the teaching of the sages (*IAB* 216–221), the prophets (*IAB* 226–227), the teaching of Jesus (*IAB* 228–229) and finally the apostolic tradition (*IAB* 230–234). The text lists the peculiar situations and forms of special human relationships. At the same time, it also emphasises the relationship with God again and again. The recurring idea is that the “lawful” obedience experienced in specific human relationships is, in fact, an act of obedience to God and becomes the beginning of the freedom experienced before Him.⁴ Ultimately, it is obedience to God that makes children’s obedience meaningful, just as it once made meaningful the kind of “disobedience” that the followers of Jesus showed to their parents or the Jewish leaders.⁵ Thus, morality based on faith in God constitutes a norm and, at the same time, questions other norms based on the individual’s belonging to God and his obligation to the Lord. In analysing and emphasising the requirement of obedience to parents, the text presupposes, albeit implicitly, an empirical and theological basis: children experience their parents as a substitute for God, psychologically modelling their first, perhaps not even thematic, an image of God on them.

The document suggests that the human experience of the parent-child relationship also influences the structures of future relationships between otherwise adult people. These relationships are detailed in certain New Testament warnings, although some rules concerning leaders can also be found in the Old Testament (*cf.* the biblical references in *IAB* 221). The term “instructions of the apostolic age” reminds us of the “household codes” of the Pauline epistles (*Haustafel, Hausordnung* – Eph 5:21–6:9; Col 3:18–4:1),⁶

4 It is worth quoting the thoughts in paragraph 217 regarding the norm on the Sabbath: “It is important to note that, because he himself obeys the same precept, the father can be a model of obedience to the true authority, that of the Lord, who does not impose servile obligations to his own advantage, but calls for a discipline that expresses the authentic way of life. In the atmosphere of rest and celebration typical of the Sabbath, the father, offering the children the joy of freedom, actually subjects them, at the same time, to the first of the commandments [...]”

5 Paragraph 229, speaking first of blood ties and then of social and religious leaders, summarises the example of Jesus and the apostles: “what emerges from the gospel perspective is the call to loving obedience towards God, which relativises any other binding connection or obligation. This should be extended, by analogy, also to the forms of obedience required by civil and religious authorities” (*Cf.* Luke 14:26; Acts 4:19 and 5:29).

6 On the “household codes,” see A. Standhartinger, “Die ‘Haustafel’ im Kolosserbrief,” *Studien zur Entstehungsgeschichte und Intention des Kolosserbriefes* (ed. A. Standhartinger) (NovTSup 94; Leiden: Brill 1999) 247–276; B. Witherington – G.F. Wessels, “Do Everything in the Name of the Lord: Ethics and ethos in Colossians,” *Identity, Ethics and Ethos in the New Testament* (ed. J.G. van der Watt) (BZNW 141; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2006) 303–333 (esp. 315–329 in the chapter); G.J. Reydam-Schils, “Clement of Alexandria on Woman and Marriage in the Light of the New Testament Household Codes,” *Greco-Roman Culture and the New Testament. Studies Commemorating the Centennial of the Pontifical Biblical Institute* (eds. D.E. Aune – F.E. Brenk) (NovTSup 143; Leiden: Brill 2012) 113–133. The texts reflect a process in which the first generation of Christians took over, reinterpreted and gave new motivation to an existing form familiar in the Jewish and Hellenistic context. The fundamental intention of exhortation and change is to help us live in a Christian way under the actual circumstances. They seek to change not the external framework but, above all, the quality of the relationships that unfold within the circumstances. Ben Witherington and G. François Wessels (“Ethics and Ethos in Colossians,” 315–316) point out the similarities between Col 3:18–4:1, Eph 5:22–6:9a and

in which the relationship between parents and children, masters and servants, and even the relationship between parents as husband and wife, are placed side by side.

In Ephesians, the precursor of such a family (and economy) model is the order of the ecclesial community. Just as in a family, in an ecclesial community, there are different functions according to various gifts of grace (Eph 4:7–16). The notion that following Christ requires a spirit of filiality towards God appears to be anticipated a few verses later: “As God’s dear children, then, take him as your pattern, and live in love just as Christ loved us, giving himself up for us as an offering and a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1–2). It is fitting that children follow their parents and love them.⁷ What makes this possible is the sacrifice of Christ which He made “for us,” that is, for the whole community. It is striking that the admonition that spouses love each other is also based on the devoted love of Christ (Eph 5:21–30). This may be the primary context behind the structure of the document.⁸

With regard to specific, so-called asymmetric relationships (parents and children, masters and servants, community leaders and believers, leaders and citizens), the document cites the admonitions of the late Pauline tradition (the deuterocanonical letters to the Ephesians, the Colossians and the pastoral letters) and the First Epistle of Peter most often. However, it takes into account other biblical passages as well. It appears natural that the earliest texts were concerned, among other things, with justifying the authority of Paul the Apostle and recommending the travelling teachers (*cf.*, e.g. the citation from 1 Thess 5:12–13 in *IAB 233*). However, as communities grew and included larger

1 Pet 2:18–3:7 and associate these with New Testament texts and early Christian writings that address slaves in particular (1 Tim 6:1–2; *Didache* 4:9–11; *Epistle of Barnabas* 19:5.7; *First Epistle of Clement* 1:3 and 21:6–8; 38:2, etc.).

7 Even though there is an important parallel between Eph 6:4 and Col 3:21, the latter has one new detail which slightly shifts the stress. The verse in Colossians makes a distinction between the admonition given to the fathers and its motivation, reinforcing the effect of parental conduct on the children. The specificity of the admonition is that it confronts the parents (especially the father) with a possible negative consequence. This is a unique feature of the “household codes.” Negative behaviour is also condemned elsewhere in the documents, but a lasting negative outcome is mentioned only here. The children may become “discouraged” (ESV, KJV), “frustrated” (JB), or “they may lose heart” (NRSV, RNJB). They may be deprived of a positive quality they would otherwise need. In a single phrase, we have a painfully accurate description of the undesirable state in which children, confined within excessive limits, over-disciplined, not sufficiently strengthened in their own will by arguments and values, can end up for the rest of their life. Col 3:21 has no theological basis; it draws on the assumption that everyday experiences and values affect all areas of life, therefore, implicitly, also religious life. I view this short passage as yet another example of how the human authors of the Bible, while not using psychological analytical concepts, were well aware that a child is vulnerable in a different sense than an adult and that their relationship can be vital and full of life for both.

8 Groups of texts that presuppose reciprocity and try to promote good behaviour are primarily exhortative and are usually grounded in Christian theology. Eph 5:22–33 offers a positive theological foundation for the relationship between husband and wife, and Eph 6:1–3 motivates children with a promising passage from the Old Testament. The relationship of servants and their masters is also regulated by Eph 6:5–9, with reference to the example of Christ and foreshadowing divine judgment. In all this, the exhortations of Ephesians deepen and follow those of Colossians.

families, the attention shifted to these a generation later.⁹ The question of correct behaviour towards an external power and the state also appears, though somewhat less frequently. Again, the most critical theological aspect is the expression of obedience to God (*cf.* Rom 13:1–7; 1 Pet 2:15–16).¹⁰

In addition to highlighting the importance of obedience to God, the document broadens the horizon again and again by emphasising the reciprocity of the relationship between the “parties.” The biblical texts call for a spirit of service in leaders and a spirit of wise obedience in the guided so that they can recognise the call and will of God in the leaders’ words or laws. As I have already mentioned, filial obedience and experience are the examples and sources of this obedience. Christ is both the means of redemption and an example to be followed. We must “become like this Child” (Matt 18:3), the Son, who redeemed us by his death and obedience (Phil 2:5–11). The paradox of Christian leadership is summed up in the idea that a leader must kneel to wash the feet of his disciples, just like Christ did (*IAB* 235, *cf.* John 13:1–20). Being the child of God is the truth of faith, and as such, it is a personal experience. At the same time, it is illustrated by the specific relationship between the church, the world and the kingdom of God.

When presenting these relationships, the document identifies “social order” as the value that sorts expected behaviours (*IAB* 230). Owing to the similar logic behind the recurring issues and following an old tradition of interpretation, the document considers the expected behaviours applicable in other situations. It assumes a kind of analogy, probably built upon some fundamental human and social structures between different areas of life. For example, it speaks of “submission” (*IAB* 230), a concept introduced by the admonitions to spouses in Ephesians (Eph 5:21), and is exemplified in the image of Jesus bending down to his disciples. It also appears as a cosmic metaphor in the Christ Hymn of Philippians (*cf.* Phil 2:6–11).

The warnings of the Pauline letters are based on the possibility of reciprocity of duties and understanding.¹¹ Their recipients have the freedom, ability, interest and motiva-

9 The order of discussion makes it clear that it concerns large families that also include other members of the household in addition to parents and children.

10 Paul and his readers certainly shared other conceptual frameworks as well, which then also became part of the Pauline argumentation. Larry L. Welborn (“‘That There May Be Equality’: The Contexts and Consequences of a Pauline Ideal,” *NTS* 59/1 [2013] 73–90) shows how the Pauline reference to “equality” in 2 Cor 8:13–15 might reflect the Greek conceptual framework behind the term, bound to friendship, *polis* and *kosmos*. Welborn pleads for an interpretation of the Pauline letters and their historical circumstances with not only theological categories (*cf. ibidem*, 74). We cannot lay enough stress on the fact that the NT literature was written and read in a certain culture, the knowledge of which enriches our understanding of the text. We should not forget, however, that Paul begins his argumentation referencing Christ’s death (2 Cor 8:9) and ends it with another reference to the Scripture (2 Cor 8:15 – Exod 16:18).

11 At this point, our paper continues with the personal-philosophical-theological approach, aiming to describe the basic structure and content of the PBC document. We can neither present nor evaluate all the research done about the “social world” of the first Christians. The novelty lies in the comparison and parallel presentation rather than the detailed evaluation of different relationships. With regard to some established forms of reciprocal and, at the same time, asymmetric relationships in the Hellenistic and Jewish societies,

tion to act for the sake of the relationship and for the sake of “social order,” the origin of which is ultimately God. The letters deem the leaders stronger and more powerful since they have the power that they can use to serve others.¹² “Subordinates” are portrayed as if maintaining the present form of the relationship were in their interests, and therefore they were unwilling to change it. By following divine provisions and setting the framework, the leaders seem to be the ones who lay the foundations of these relationships.

I would like to emphasise that the section in question discusses the relationships between parents and children, masters and servants, community leaders and believers, and leaders and citizens as part of the subchapter on “parents and children.” Social integration of the individual into school, work, religious community and secular society appears to follow the model of the basic cell of society, i.e. the family. From a theological point of view, this means that man can obey God in all these, that man can discover God’s presence and guidance in social structures and shape these structures accordingly. Therefore, the willingness to follow can be understood as a kind of potential that the leader and the guided parent and child are aware of and which they actualise in their way, in accordance with their interests and goals.¹³ Obedience and openness to God seek real paths and opportunities; they build human community. Obedience to human beings, in turn, receives its foundation and a positive perspective from living with openness to God. Obedience, in this case, is first and foremost not a practical, pragmatic requirement or an external decision which is independent of personal motives. Nor does it merely reflect the actual state of the relationship between two people. Instead, it is open to the development and perspective we seek in God. A genuine human community is built

see E.D. MacGillivray, “Re-Evaluating Patronage and Reciprocity in Antiquity and New Testament Studies,” *JGRChJ* 6 (2009) 37–81.

12 It is noteworthy that the admonitions always address the “weaker” party first, and only then the “stronger,” the more responsible one. The logic of reciprocity suggests that obedience or submission remains possible even if it appears as though there were no other means of changing the situation or the attitude of the other party. Appealing to the stronger party is restrictive, i.e. it attempts to curb their possible violent, dominant actions. Cf. Witherington – Wessels, “Ethics and Ethos in Colossians,” 319–320. Such addresses are usually absent in similar household codes other than the New Testament.

13 On the subject of obedience, see M. Wirth, *Distanz des Gehorsams. Theorie, Ethik und Kritik einer Tugend* (Religion in Philosophy and Theology 87; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2016). Mathias Wirth describes the opposition sources to religious and social forms of obedience in detail and then provides theological examples and conceptual contexts with a positive perspective in mind. He highlights the example of Jesus (*ibidem*, 370–376), who performs a subversive act in washing his disciples’ feet, reinterpreting the notions of “master” and “servant.” Similarly to Eberhard Jüngel, Wirth also thinks (*ibidem*, 391) that God restrains His power, and it is on the cross where this is the most evident. God leaves room for human freedom, which man experiences not in spite of his being a creature but rather because of being a creature. Obedience, Wirth argues (*ibidem*, 394–395), is ultimately an act of freedom that seeks always to maintain a relationship with the other, and in the name of which liberation must be sought even in the face of existential fear. God wants the freedom of man and the individual. For a shorter but similar discussion, see M. Bracci, “Nell’obbedienza di Gesù, Figlio di Dio e nostro fratello,” *Synaxis* 37/2 (2019) 11–24. The obedience of Jesus, the Son towards the Father, is presented here as a theological foundation of possible obedience of believers in freedom and love.

around both personal growth and community goals. Indeed, it is the surprising, gift-like harmony of these two that seems to transcend what humans can create.

Before moving on to the second part of the paper, it should be stressed that the biblical texts and the Commission document are not in any way about the unequal dignity or unequal individual worth of persons. Asymmetries are realised in a relationship, and they require some action. It is precisely this action that the “instructions of the apostolic tradition” describe and associate with norms and patterns. These are rules of reciprocal action that only turn into a momentarily fixed, observed, and therefore seemingly static situation in a logical sense. Anthropological determination is not subordination or helplessness, nor some kind of superiority or power. Instead, it is the ability of the individual to submit himself to someone for something or serve others – perhaps even by leading them – and obey God at the same time.¹⁴

2. Social and Philosophical Perspectives on Asymmetric Relationships

The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission states in several places that what is revealed in the biblical text must be interpreted correctly. Examples of such interpretation are provided sometimes; at other times, the document is more reticent and leaves the more detailed discussion of the issue to the experts on morality. In regard to particular biblical passages, it expresses its wish to distance itself from them by raising questions.¹⁵ Correct interpretation ensures both the autonomy of the interpreter and the relevance of the text by understanding it in a way that is acceptable today.¹⁶ Raising

14 See F.S. Malan, “Unity of Love in the Body of Christ: Identity, Ethics and Ethos in Ephesians,” *Identity, Ethics and Ethos in the New Testament* (ed. J.G. van der Watt) (BZNW 141; Berlin – New York: De Gruyter 2006) 257–288. François S. Malan’s summary is as follows: “God put all things in subjection beneath Christ’s feet and he is filling the universe in all its parts with his immeasurable love. The church, as the body in submission to Christ, its head, manifests his presence as the community in which his rule of love and unity is anticipated, and through which the wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms. It includes the members’ submission to one another within the divinely ordered relationships, and their following of God’s messengers (4,11). It extends to the wife’s submission to her loving husband, children’s obedience to their parents who lead them in the ways of the Lord, and labourers’ cheerful serving their employers who follow the will of God wholeheartedly (5,22 – 6,9).”

15 Paragraph 203 discusses spousal relationship in such a manner. A similar case with regard to the situation of women is point 134 in *Ispirazione e verità della Sacra Scrittura. La Parola che viene da Dio e parla di Dio per salvare il mondo* (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20140222_ ispirazione-verita-sacra-scrittura_it.html [access: 29.12.2021]), a document published by the Commission in 2014.

16 The document understands itself as an example of such an interpretation. The Pontifical Biblical Commission evidently presupposes the rules of interpretation expressed, among others, in *Dei Verbum* 12 and *Verbum Domini* 45. While the former stresses the importance of the whole Bible and thus the unity of the Revelation and its correct understanding, the latter invites Catholic biblical scholars to engage in a fruitful dialogue with bishops and theologians. We would like to emphasise here that “the force and power in the word of God” (*Dei Verbum* 21) unfolds itself in the ongoing process of interpretation, faithful to the tradition, driven by a personal

questions is an excellent way to leave room for further considerations, especially in our age when everything is changing so fast. It is not always clear how the values of biblical times should be understood, preached and followed. Concerning our question about asymmetric relationships, this means that not only the category itself must be analysed but also the role it may play in connecting biblical times and our time.

The document refers to the relationships in question as “asymmetric” in two places (*LAB* 233, 235).¹⁷ Since the concept of asymmetry is used in many contexts today, it is worth asking first what kind of asymmetry is meant in this case and then examining whether clarification of the concept can help mutual understanding.¹⁸

The most common notion of symmetry and asymmetry refers to static realities. We use these words to describe drawn, shaped, constructed objects, geometrical forms or even living things. These notions help in the structural modelling of compounds in chemistry, the description of forces and counter-forces in physics, the comparison of vectors in mathematics, and even the ordering of sentence systems or forms of thoughts in linguistics.¹⁹ Therefore, symmetry and asymmetry are understood through pictorial or abstract shapes and are mostly used to describe a static or a changing but momentarily graspable system.

Symmetry, and in its absence, asymmetry, are also applied to human relations between individuals and institutions, and even between states. Symmetry has a positive connotation as it is associated with equality before the law, equality in relations and dignity. Asymmetry, in contrast, implies the lack of something – the lack of comparability, equality, equal status and equal dignity. In the case of human (personal) or inter-group relationships, it is questionable from what point of view and to what extent they can be considered static, and what it means that change or development is also present in these relationships, adapting to their changing and evolving participants.

Focusing on the interpersonal relations of asymmetry, I will first briefly present some contemporary examples where asymmetry appears as an interpretative category, and then I will outline its socio-philosophical and socio-ethical implications.

and ecclesiastical commitment. The biblical text itself invites readers and interpreters to discover the truth and requires faithfulness, while the language and categories might differ over the ages.

17 The document also uses the term “asymmetry” in a few other places. Paragraph 54 refers to the relationship between God and Israel entering into a covenant relationship. Paragraph 151 deals with the asymmetry of a parent-child relationship, explicitly distinguishing it from that of spouses who are considered equals. The latter is nevertheless mentioned as an asymmetric condition in the context of the Epistle to the Ephesians in paragraph 203. Finally, following the sections detailed above, paragraph 237 notes that brothers are in fact always in a different position, i.e. their actual position is “asymmetric.”

18 Besides asymmetry, it is also important to deepen today’s understanding of other concepts. These include obedience, which has already been partly touched upon, and reciprocity, briefly discussed below.

19 Since biblical and ancient linguistic examples are in focus, a reference to an example from ancient poetry is in order: H. Gzella, “Parallelismus und Asymmetrie in ugaritischen Texten,” *Parallelismus membrorum* (ed. A. Wagner) (OBO 224; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht – Fribourg: Presses Universitaires 2007) 133–146.

The symmetry-asymmetry issue is fundamental in cases where an individual meets an institution or a group and where an individual needs help. The person is in a vulnerable situation, and for this reason, it becomes questionable whether entering or agreeing to enter the asymmetric relationship is a good solution. Take just one example: it is debatable whether the doctor-patient relationship should be considered asymmetric. People often claim that it is outdated to say that, on the one hand, the physician's expertise and responsibility and, on the other hand, the patient's vulnerability create asymmetry (real and positive asymmetry). Instead, they stress the importance of cooperation between the two parties.²⁰ Others argue that even though it is an asymmetric relationship, the physician's competence, training, situational awareness, treatment recommendations and the true purpose warrant the asymmetry (functional asymmetry), and without these qualities, the relationship would not exist in the first place.²¹ They highlight that while symmetry may be sought in therapeutic relationships, certain situations, such as online therapy, can complicate the relationship and amplify its asymmetric traits.²² Still, others note pastoral care relationships similar to psychotherapy as a paradoxical reality. The "mature authority," the helper, defines the framework of the relationship and, having insight into the other party's difficulties, can help and guide the recipient. At the same time, the helper forms a partnership with the recipient, is authentic towards him or her and makes their equality evident, thereby contributing to the recipient's taking responsibility for himself or herself.²³

Society can tolerate the habits of groups that exist but do not change the norms of social order. It can accept these habits as established without willing to change the values and habits of the majority.²⁴ It indicates asymmetry in a general sense when the relationship

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- 20 Cf. K.-M. Taube, "Patient-Doctor Relationship in Dermatology. From Compliance to Concordance," *Acta Derm Venereol* 96/Suppl. 217 (2016) 25–29. Klaus-Michael Taube promotes a strategy of cooperation rather than the traditional asymmetric relations. He draws on the example of psychoanalysis and believes that the traditional approach (where the doctor gives instructions and the patient accepts and follows them) has been replaced by an appreciation of intersubjectivity.
- 21 See I. Saake, "Die Dominanz des Arztes. Warum medizinische Asymmetrien unvermeidbar sind," *Ärztliche Tätigkeit im 21. Jahrhundert – Profession oder Dienstleistung* (eds. S. Klinke – M. Kadmon) (Berlin: Springer 2018) 311–329. According to Irmhild Saake, the doctor-patient relationship is functionally asymmetric, despite modern expectations of symmetry. There is an unbridgeable gap between the professional competence of the doctor and the direct experience of the patient.
- 22 See S. Cipolletta – E. Frassoni – E. Faccio, "Construing a Therapeutic Relationship Online: An Analysis of Videoconference Sessions," *Clinical Psychologist* 22/1 (2018) 220–229. In online therapies, the relationship between therapist and patient appears to be asymmetric.
- 23 Cf. T. Tomcsányi – L. Fodor, "Segítő kapcsolat, segítő szindróma, segítő identitás," *Egymás közt – egymásért* (eds. I. Jelenits – T. Tomcsányi) (Budapest: HÍD Családsegítő Központ – Szeged: Szeged-Csanádi Püspökség 1990) 19–45.
- 24 Cf. F. Macioce, "Toleration as Asymmetric Recognition," *Persona y derecho* 77/2 (2017) 227–250. The author cites the principle of social tolerance in cases where even though the law is not changed because of a minority's different behaviour from that of the majority (accommodation), the behaviour is still socially tolerated and accepted. The author argues that there is an asymmetric relationship between two groups of different weights in such instances. "Toleration happens in a relationship of power imbalance: this is the reason why I have labelled toleration as a form of asymmetric relationship" (*ibidem*, 250).

between ideological principles and personal attitudes of members of politically opposing parties are being examined.²⁵

Philosophy is also concerned with the asymmetry of personal relationships and its significance. Modernity accentuated the freedom, independence and dignity of the person, and it presupposed free persons of equal status in personal relationships. The objective freedom of individuals had to manifest itself in their freedom in the social sense, their capacity to act and their equality before the law. In these, it became tangible and justifiable. The desirable ideal was a responsible, reciprocal relationship between free persons. Postmodern philosophy lays an even greater emphasis on personal freedom and human rights, in parallel with the concept that considers interpersonal relationships as inherently asymmetric.

French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas shaped the notions of double asymmetry and vulnerability of the other. The term “double asymmetry” describes the process of communication between two persons. The one addressing the other and establishing a relationship is always a “leading” role. Human beings get their names from other humans, and thus, from the beginning, the relationship they have is not a symmetric one. However, it is not only the beginning that counts. As Levinas puts it, humans are taken charge of by others – by their faces.²⁶ Double asymmetry means this strange interconnectedness, this ongoing internal play of power and change of power between persons interacting and communicating. Vulnerability is the permanent situation of the human person, his state of being dependent on being addressed by the other.²⁷

25 This is what John T. Jost's surveys (“Ideological Asymmetries and the Essence of Political Psychology,” *Political Psychology* 38/2 [2017] 167–208) have found about the personal psychological structures of right-wing and left-wing politicians and people with political party preferences. According to the author, personal attitudes are also reflected in political principles.

26 For a brief introduction to Levinas's ethical thoughts, see T. Tatranský, “A Reciprocal Asymmetry? Levinas's Ethics Reconsidered,” *Ethical Perspectives* 15/3 (2008) 293–307. Tomáš Tatranský shows why Levinas's “account of asymmetry” cannot be a foundation for reciprocal relationships in the end. In his view, the “Other” calls “me” to sacrifice myself for him or her, but I cannot expect him or her to do the same. “Levinas's ethics is [...] not an ethics of sacrifice *in general*, but an ethics of exclusively and inalienably *my* sacrifice” (*ibidem*, 296). After presenting Levinas's thoughts, Tatranský attempts to “go beyond Levinas” by relying on the observations of Derrida and Ricoeur and emphasising the possibility and value of friendship and gift.

27 See S. Herrmann, *Symbolische Verletzbarkeit. Die doppelte Asymmetrie des Sozialen nach Hegel und Levinas* (Sozialphilosophische Studien 7; Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2013). Steffen Herrmann analyses and compares the vision of Hegel and Levinas. Hegel, he says, uses the relationship of master and servant to illustrate the dependent relationship in which one depends on the recognition of the other. The master has to acknowledge the servant, and the servant is dependent on this acknowledgement. The dependent man is described by the fear of death: he seems to owe his existence to the other. He can only be himself if others confirm his image of himself. Levinas, however, interprets the relationship with the other not as dependence but as “exposure” or “vulnerability.” A person enters into a responsible relationship with another in a way that precedes his or her individual choices and decisions, and even his or her realisations. The “face,” the being of the other, addresses me and holds me responsible, and asks me how I relate to him. Responsibility is not actualised by mutual agreement but through confrontation with the symbolic vulnerability of the other. The metaphor of the relationship between master and servant is replaced by the image of “hostage-taking” in Levinas's writings. The master becomes the “hostage” of the servant when the master sees himself in the servant. He can

It follows that the individual not only depends on the recognition and affirmation of his freedom, but it appears that he can participate in an actual encounter with others only in an asymmetrical way.²⁸ The recognition and assertion of the person's dignity are replaced by the assertion of the woundedness of the individual, which is essentially irremediable and can only be overcome in practice.²⁹ The need for symmetry between interacting subjects is therefore replaced or complemented by a desire to establish a system of relationships in which the possibility of autonomous action is always left open for the subject.³⁰ The individual in this situation demands, in principle, total and absolute autonomy. His nature is expressed in activity and participation. This is seemingly the exact opposite of the orientation of obedience, which is receptive and prioritises the other. The desirable goal is not only recognition and affirmation that humans expect from others. Instead of, or rather in addition to this, what is desirable is active involvement and participation in decisions and community processes, in which the individual's actual positive functioning and struggle with the asymmetry of relationships prove

only realise his own being if he incorporates his responsibility towards the other into his vision of himself. See also T. Bedorf, *Dimensionen des Dritten. Sozialphilosophische Modelle zwischen Ethischem und Politischem* (Phänomenologische Untersuchungen 16; München: Fink 2003) 35–41; J. Czapski, "Ausbruch aus dem Sein. Verwundbarkeit als rätselhafter Sinn der Menschlichkeit im Denken von Emmanuel Levinas," *Verletzbarkeit des Humanen. Sexualisierte Gewalt an Minderjährigen im interdisziplinären Diskurs* (ed. T. Bahne) (Regensburg: Pustet 2021) 44–56.

- 28 Herrmann, *Symbolische Verletzbarkeit*, 155. "On one side is the subject that expresses its desire for recognition, and on the other side is the subject that must respond to that desire before it can assert its own desire for recognition. This basic communicative structure forces the subjects involved in the social encounter into two completely different positions. As a consequence, the interpersonal relationship can no longer be described as a symmetric relationship – as this would imply the interchangeability of positions – but as an alternating-sided asymmetric relationship. It is an asymmetry that is not one-sided but two-sided: on one side, it is a dependence on recognition, while on the other side, it is a vulnerability to dependence on the former recognition. In this context, I am talking about the double asymmetry of social relations." Thus, according to Herrmann (*ibidem*, 210–211), the parallel "servant" and "hostage" situations in personal relations are realised in a situation of mutual "subjection." It is not a matter of deliberate choice but the order of reality. If we deny, falsify or unilaterally dissolve this, we cause and suffer in "social pathology."
- 29 Heidemarie Bennent-Vahle (*Mit Gefühl denken. Einblicke in die Philosophie der Emotionen* [Freiburg – München: Alber 2013] 254) presents forgiveness as an asymmetric action. It is difficult to forgive when this fact does not appear to have any meaning for the other party. In the context of our paper, we can say that it is the fundamental asymmetry of existence in relation to which we need to practice unilateral forgiveness in order to become a mature person.
- 30 Anna M. Riedl (*Ethik an den Grenzen der Souveränität. Christliche Sozialethik im Dialog mit Judith Butler unter Berücksichtigung des Kindeswohlbegriffs* [Paderborn: Schöningh 2017]) analyses the writings of Judith Butler based on the concept of "children's goods." Her starting point in practice is, among other things (*cf. ibidem*, 33–34), the experience of child protection by helping children to grow sometimes goes from one extreme to the other: either it focuses on providing the necessary protection and support, or it shifts the responsibility to the children. When what is highlighted is the asymmetries in the relationship between adults and children, the aim is to defend the interests of both parties. However, usually little participation is achieved. And when participation alone is emphasised, the system tends to reduce adult responsibility and obscure power relations. Riedl follows the analyses of Judith Butler, who radicalises, among other things, Levinas's ideas. Since recognition by the other changes us, Riedl argues, only "undetermined" (*Unbestimmtheit*) openness and presence can be the right attitude in education and a relationship with the other.

successful.³¹ In this approach, respect for the other is made theoretically possible by recognising the asymmetry of the relationship, as the other's autonomous right to exist is also recognised and affirmed at the same time.³²

There is no doubt that, although less radically, theology also tries to respond to the changes in thinking.³³ It is keen to emphasise the truth of God, who gives us space in creation, who liberates us from bondage, who, through freedom, calls us to act responsibly, and who fosters brotherhood.³⁴ The power of God is shown in different ways in the discourse. In the theology of creation, it is the divine actuality that gives existence. In the soteriology system, it is the proclamation of the vulnerability of the cross in which the powerlessness of God, through Trinitarian and incarnational mediation, defeat the power of the world.³⁵ As we have observed in the case of asymmetric personal relationships, all power on earth competes with other earthly powers, so this asymmetry makes us contest, at least in an ethical sense. God's power, however, is of a completely different rank and nature. Thus it is precisely the positing of this radically different – infinitely asymmetric – power that allows people to overcome their asymmetries with earthly, practical and negative consequences.³⁶

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- 31 Tatiana Shchytsova ("Intergenerative Asymmetrie und Gabe. Zur Heuristik und Poetik des Verhältnisses zwischen Erwachsenen und Kindern," *Kontexte des Leiblichen* [eds. C. Nielsen – K. Novotný – T. Nenon] [Nordhausen: Bautz 2016] 219–232) examines the relationship of parent and child. Shchytsova uses Hegelian categories to observe sharing or gifting across generations in the "gift" or "discovery" of the world. Parent and child do not participate in the relationship in the same way, yet both are renewed when they interact with each other and the world.
- 32 Cf. Riedl, *Ethik*, 153–154. The fundamental vulnerability of man, according to Riedl, is not a kind of negativity but a kind of ethical potential. Addressing the other, on what we depend on in order to be able to exist in the first place, wounds us because it defines and changes us. Our ontological vulnerability is linguistic-performative. It is articulated in addressing and naming the other, as well as in speech. All this is an opportunity to give the other freedom. "Im Anschluss an Butler eröffnet sich eine Perspektive auf Asymmetrie, mit der sich eine ethische Betonung der Achtung von Differenz und von dort eine kindeswohlrelevante Argumentation gegen die Negation der Asymmetrie gewinnen lässt." Based on this approach, the other (the child in this case) must be affirmed in his "otherness" alone.
- 33 While analysing the connection of faith, theology, and philosophy, Bertram Stubenrauch (*Theologie studieren* [UTB 4932; Paderborn: Schöningh 2019] 52) argues that Christianity is characterised by a kind of asymmetry. Its dogmas are not on the same level as human thought and philosophy. Faith, which already includes theology in its formulation, seeks philosophical reasoning as a secondary consideration, but philosophy in itself never leads to faith or justifies it in the full sense of the word. "Was von der Christusverkündigung her vorgegeben ist und zum Glauben führt, lässt sich philosophisch nicht einholen. Denn der Glaube wird evoziert, er wird erweckt. [...] der Glaube weiß die Transzendenz gewissermaßen 'engagiert' – und bezeugt so ihren erkenntnistiftenden Primat" (*ibidem*, 53).
- 34 Because of the biblical relevance of the topic, B. Schöning, *Geschwisterlichkeit lernen. Eine neue theologische Einschätzung der Aufstiegs Erzählung Davids* (BWANT 223; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2019) should be mentioned.
- 35 Cf. Wirth, *Distanz des Gehorsams*, 315. Wirth presents Florian Wagner's thoughts on the "theology of recognition" (*Theologie der Anerkennung*). He claims that Florian Wagner attempts to think about the relationship between God and man in a symmetric way. In Wagner's view, the power of God is most manifested in incapability, indeed, He shows himself as being incapable, and with this, He waives all absolute claims.
- 36 See W. Freistetter – C. Wagnsonner, "Asymmetrie im Spiegel der Weltreligionen," *Aspekte der Asymmetrie – Reflexionen über ein gesellschafts- und sicherheitspolitisches Phänomen* (eds. J. Schröfl – T. Pankratz – E. Micewski)

3. Questions, Suggestions and Ways to Promote Discourse

I have briefly presented some biblical perspectives on asymmetric relationships, as far as they can be understood in the Biblical Commission document, and some contemporary socio-philosophical aspects of the issue as well. Now I will compare the two in order to learn and look for a common language.

The two systems of thought agree in assuming asymmetry in human relationships. In the biblical texts, actual differences between people concern the order of lineage, social potential and responsibilities, and the role played in the community. Postmodern social philosophy treats vulnerability to the other as a fundamental determinant of human existence. The basic tendency of biblical texts, mostly related to St Paul and the Pauline tradition, is to strive for reciprocity, that is, to overcome inequalities by regulating roles. Radical forms of the socio-philosophical approach view the principle of reciprocity as impracticable. They only attempt to empower and help the parties in their freedom. Religious thought views God, on the one hand, as someone against whom humans can only accept a situation of total inequality and, on the other hand, as someone to whom they owe their freedom, and even as someone with whom, by entering into a deeper relationship, they become freer themselves. It acknowledges the fact of asymmetric relationships and attempts to discover the authority and guidance of God in these by accepting the principle and value of tradition. In contrast, having experienced countless forms of abuse of power, most people only recognise a temporary authority at most in today's societies.

The two systems of thought are indeed in tension with each other. The question of obedience seems to be central to religion, but it is in many ways entirely rejected by contemporary popular thought. Both systems of thought realise the asymmetric situations; however, their attitudes towards them are quite different. While religion tends to look at the positive value of asymmetric relationships (ultimately in terms of obedience to God), contemporary popular thought always tries to restore the individual's freedom with the intention of eliminating asymmetry.

(Baden-Baden: Nomos 2006) 173–179. There is never complete symmetry between states and groups, but it can be observed how asymmetric relations are sought to be ethically legitimised by a group of interested parties. The authors conclude as follows: “Die Bezeichnung ‘Asymmetrie’ muss hier freilich mit Vorsicht verwendet werden: Er verneint nicht eine zumindest denkbare Symmetrie des Gott-Mensch-Verhältnisses – denn was sollte eine Symmetrie zwischen Gott und Mensch bedeuten? – sondern drückt lediglich aus, dass das Verhältnis zwischen Gott und Mensch sich begrifflich auch mit dem Begriff der Symmetrie keinesfalls festlegen lässt. Allerdings gibt die Bestimmung des Verhältnisses als asymmetrisches ein Mittel an die Hand, den Zusammenhang zwischen dem Verhältnis zu Gott und der Menschen untereinander zu denken: Gerade weil jeder Mensch sein Leben in gleicher Weise Gott bzw. dem göttlichen Prinzip verdankt und weil diese Asymmetrie deshalb für Leben und Handeln entscheidende Bedeutung erlangt, relativiert sich die Bedeutung von Asymmetrien zwischen den Menschen. Es mag sie weiterhin geben, aber vor Gott oder im Hinblick auf das Göttliche sind alle Menschen gleich. In dieser Einsicht liegt der Kern des sozialetischen Anspruchs der Weltreligionen.”

The reality or the meaning of reciprocity also appears problematic.³⁷ The biblical text testifies to the possibility of genuine reciprocity in shaping the relationships through apostolic exhortations. What makes this possible despite the momentary difference in roles is the existence of a third party before Whom the relationship is alive and interpretable. The approach emphasising the woundedness and vulnerability of the individual uses the hermeneutics of suspicion. It is driven by the urge for a constant liberation from the presupposed asymmetry since this is the only thing it deems possible.

To think about these obvious differences together in some way, I believe that as a theologian, I must first emphasise that asymmetry is not about static “essences.” It is about dynamic and functional “roles.” Humans can dissociate a person from his role at a given moment. And this is true conversely as well, i.e. humans can assess not someone else’s personal qualities but the decisions associated with his role. Not everyone is suited to every role because not everyone can step out of the role at the right moment and recognise the limitations of the role. For this reason, the asymmetry of roles does not presuppose the fact that persons are evaluated differently. On the contrary, it may offer the possibility of finding one’s way to the right and good desire for true equality, for being genuinely addressed by the other.

Secondly, people carry their childhood experiences with them, so it is indeed not automatic that in actual leadership structures, the other is an “adult” in a psychological sense. Encouragement is usually needed in a community for people to exercise their rights. Raising children to be free means, among other things, encouraging and helping them, asking them how they can live their freedom at a given moment and what they feel good about. Leading communities involves asking their members to express their opinion and their values. Religious obedience does not mean that the superior (parent, leader, etc.) is aware of prescriptions in advance and, therefore, can recall the obedient conduct appropriate in the given situation. Instead, it means that they have learnt to live in a way attentive to God as He is revealed in the law, the Scripture, reality and the Church. It also includes the idea that humans can discover how the man entrusted to them also evolves in this attentive freedom, the “law” of which is sometimes partly a momentary experience of his situation in the world. There is no doubt that instead of a one-sided emphasis on the authority of parents and leaders, we must remember that God wants to be present

37 Among other things, Hartmut Rosa’s theory of resonance provides an apt picture of how human beings long for a relationship with their environment, or at least a part of it, in which not only are they given recognition, but they are also involved and touched. Humans seek to experience reciprocity in their relationships, even at the elementary level, in relation to objects or phenomena. The specificity of such an encounter is the “transformative appropriation” of the other. Cf. H. Rosa, “Resonanz als Schlüsselbegriff der Sozialtheorie,” *Resonanz. Im interdisziplinären Gespräch mit Hartmut Rosa* (ed. J.-P. Wils) (Baden-Baden: Nomos 2019) 11–30; A. Laumer, “Beschleunigung und Resonanz. Pastoraltheologische Perspektiven zu Hartmut Rosas Sozialtheorie,” *TGL* 111/1 (2021) 1–15. Rosa’s theory is not explicitly or exclusively about two individuals meeting. Instead, it expresses the reciprocity, the specific quality of a person and his or her environment and its influence on him or her. However, an encounter with the material world can also be a model for what happens between individuals, and an encounter between two persons can also be a specific model for larger group processes.

in the little ones for the “big ones.” If this emphasis gained more and more ground in the life of our communities, it could help us experience what it means to move from “double asymmetry” to “dynamic mutuality,” where the former stresses the fundamental personal vulnerability in a negative sense, while the latter sees asymmetry as a challenge and attempts to take advantage of it in a positive sense.

Thirdly, with regard to the vulnerability and inherent woundedness of the individual, I would like to point out that vulnerability also applies to the leader. Even though the Biblical Commission document does not mention this aspect in describing the letters of the Pauline school, I believe that the party in the “stronger position” of an asymmetric relationship necessarily becomes vulnerable when he or she is involved in the relationship. Paul is also wounded while writing his letters. It is probably no coincidence that many today perceive certain leadership situations as distorting personality. Flexible role changes – jobs, community and family relationships – seem more acceptable and even desirable today than ever before. Nonetheless, the infinite altering of roles is hampered by the finite nature of human existence. Properly regulating how to lead a community is a matter of practice and experience. Vulnerability does not only characterise human relations in a metaphysical sense but also in a bilateral and reciprocal way. Although the “more adult” person can do more in a more responsible and conscious way to improve the quality of a relationship, their entering the relationship also comes with personal and social vulnerabilities, precisely if they genuinely seek to connect, if they choose to act according to their experiences and the principle of responsibility for the other.

Finally, we must not forget that biblical texts reflect the social expectations of different ages. Therefore, it cannot be expected that all their statements can be brought into line with today’s vision and deeper understanding of the truth about humans. We do not understand the truth and the correct interpretation of the biblical message if we try to make it immutable.³⁸ The texts presented underline the value of reciprocity and rest on the possibility of action and the presence of God. There is always a “tertius,” the third party before Whom reciprocity is called into question, the balance gets upset, and boundaries become unstable or violated. It does make a difference in what kind of God we believe in, how liberating the community which advocates freedom is, and what kind of liberation it enables.

³⁸ See R.E. Ciampa, “Ideological Challenges for Bible Translator,” *IJFM* 28/3 (2011) 139–148. Roy E. Ciampa presents the potential dangers of the so-called “direct transferability,” that is, the idea of Bible translators to transmit the thoughts of the Bible from their original cultural context and age into ours without noticing possible underlying ideological motifs. Ciampa’s examples include relationships also present in the PBC document: slavery and marriage, husband and wife. From our perspective, these examples show and reinforce the necessity of the task undertaken in this short study: it is essential to examine asymmetric relationships and notice how much and what significance the true values of the biblical message have today.

Conclusions

Let us briefly summarise the results of our investigation. The first section followed the lead and interpreted a section of the Pontifical Biblical Commission document entitled *What is man?* (230–234) about different yet parallel human relationships. We called its structure “genetic” because it observes the development of human relationships and the history of human beings from their beginning, that is, from the parental relationship and the Creation by God, respectively. There is a change of direction in this sense: at first, children imagine God based on their parents’ behaviour. Later it may be God whose care and love help adults take responsibility for each other. We have noted how the document suggests a multiplication of the same relational patterns in human life: our various relationships with God, parents and different types of leaders appear to show similarities. The strength of theology manifests itself in the fact that it describes a real relationship with God, offers models and structures that can shape this relationship and may encourage people to reorganise their other relationships.

The second section of this paper analysed the concept of asymmetry, looking at its “physical” meaning, and developing first a dynamic, then a static view of it, arriving at a philosophical evaluation of human relationships as thoroughly asymmetric. Among Emmanuel Levinas’s ideas, we find the concept of personal vulnerability that can be, on the one hand, a source of the negation of the very possibility of reciprocity in human relationships – and, at the same time, the very foundation of it. But this can only happen if we assume the presence of a “third,” assuring the ongoing interchange of gifts, goods, love and care between two persons. Asymmetry is a part of human reality and experience which must be in some way reckoned and dealt with. The inherent dynamic asymmetry of human relationships is mirrored in the social and institutional parallels analysed in the first section.

The third part combined the different areas of theological anthropology and social ethics discussed in the first two parts. Though employing different concepts, both anthropology and ethics reflect fundamental aspects of human relationships. New Testament writings stress obedience to God and submission to each other, thereby forming a triangle of duties. Modern thought, in contrast, tends to neglect or even deny the existence of an objective “law” that could serve as a standard measure. It also searches for and tries to defend the interests of the weaker party by requiring greater respect for the other before the “otherness” and by promoting active participation, assuming an open system of values instead of a closed one. In this context, theology points at the humiliated Jesus and his presence in both vulnerable parties. Reciprocity builds on different duties, values and possibilities in an ongoing process of change in every human relationship. The very process of biblical interpretation shows how vulnerable the “Word of God” is. By interpreting it, we admit our limits, vulnerability and fallibility.

We chose a direction for our study that appeared to develop some aspects of the PBC document. The document’s focus on anthropology and development, the combination

of essential and relational categories, did not require presenting the otherwise well-studied socio-historical background of early Christianity, which in this case remains a silent but very rich treasury of examples and concretisations. The document presupposes an unchangeable reality in the changing situations of humans and history and values and ways of action that help people positively relate to each other. We have already mentioned that asymmetry is a part of human reality acknowledged by both the PBC document and the socio-ethical discourse. The question is, then, how we should deal with it. In church statements, we notice greater consciousness of equal dignity of men and women, especially in marriage, just as in the clear refutation of slavery in any form. It seems that the outlines of a wishful parent-child relationship are also present. Still, their practicable form in schools, parishes and even families is less understood. The child abuse crisis has raised many questions about the exercise of power in church communities. These issues may prove to be areas where church communities and other social institutions can learn together and from each other. More sensitivity to these questions is the beginning of change.

This study remains fragmentary and unelaborated in many respects. The impact and correlation between the image of God and parental relationship call for a psychological investigation as well. This area, touched upon several times, deserves attention also from theology if theologians want to make their voice heard in a society that very often thinks in categories of personal growth. However, in theology, questions of church discipline, that is, of canon law, arise. Are norms and rules of obedience practicable? How should they remain practicable in communities described by asymmetric relationships? These are some of the many questions that merit attention and further consideration about asymmetry and theological anthropology.

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