

HUGH PRICE HUGHES LECTURES – 2018 – “VOICES FROM THE EDGE”

‘Feminism on the Frontline: Friend or Foe of the Christian Faith?’

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Tuesday, 13th February, 2018

In January 2016, women in cities around the world donned pink “pussy hats” and took to the streets. These good-natured demonstrations were prompted by the election of President Donald Trump, but that was the catalyst for a wider protest against the rise and rise of the Far Right across the western democracies and beyond. It was as if the slumbering feminist movement of the late twentieth century had erupted to become a volcanic force in the modern world. In this spirit of newfound solidarity and confidence, women have begun to speak out on issues ranging from equal pay to sexual abuse and harassment, so that the battle of the sexes is raging around us in new and challenging ways. Meanwhile, the very idea of sexual difference is being contested as gendered identities melt and multiply, and the nuclear family dissolves into more fluid and diverse configurations of loving and belonging.

For some, these changes strike at the very foundations of the Christian faith. Across denominational boundaries, conservative Christians are forming highly politicised alliances, fuelled by social media, to defend marriage and the family against the onslaught of feminism, homosexuality and “gender ideology”. In the widely-quoted words of American televangelist Pat Robertson: “Feminism is a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians.”

Robertson’s rhetoric may be more colourful than most, but the underlying sentiment is echoed in a host of other contexts. For example, in the last thirty years, the Holy See (the Vatican state) has used its Permanent Observer status at the United Nations to form conservative religious alliances in a display of interfaith solidarity that is truly amazing – evangelicals, Muslims, Orthodox churches, Orthodox Jews and Roman Catholic pro-family groups have united around a common cause, and the Holy See has provided a political platform at the UN for their views to be imposed on the international development agenda.

This means that, while the language of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) has widespread currency in international development discourse, you will not find that expression in any official UN document. The term used by the UN is the rather more long-winded ‘sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights’ – sexual rights are not recognised, and reproductive rights are understood to be the right to have children, to outlaw abortion and – for Catholics – to refuse contraception.

I’m not simply dismissing these concerns and objections. In a world ruled by Malthusian economics and the brutal ideology of neo-liberal politics, it’s vital to defend the rights of poor women to have children, a right that’s all too often ignored by western campaigners on reproductive rights. But it’s also vital to empower women to make responsible choices about if and when to have children and how many children to have, and to enable them to protect themselves by all means possible from unwanted pregnancies caused by sexual coercion, abuse and rape. There’s an abundance of statistics to show that the best way to tackle poverty and bring about social and economic transformation is not by imposing population control

policies, but by educating women, reducing infant mortality, and giving women access to reliable contraception if they choose to use it.

It's also important to recognise that Christians of all denominations are in the frontline of providing education, pastoral support and health care to poor women and girls in the Global South. In their best-selling book *Half the Sky*, Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl Wudunn document the many ways in which women and girls around the world still experience sexual violence and suffer the effects of poverty and religious conservatism – particularly around issues of maternal mortality and childbearing – but they also note the extent to which Christians are involved at the level of grassroots support and care.¹

Nevertheless, Christians lack a credible public voice on these important ethical issues when debates about population, gender and sexual rights are co-opted by coalitions of mostly male religious conservatives, who form improbable interfaith and ecumenical alliances for the purposes of closing ranks to resist the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Underlying such campaigns is not a concern for the well-being of women and children, but a desire to control the sexual and reproductive female body. In the face of such unity, ecumenism and interfaith initiatives manifest the unifying power of a common threat – woman, Eve – far more than they manifest the unifying power of a genuine moral cause.

Meanwhile, inside as well as outside the Church, more and more women are standing up and speaking out. In April last year, a Canadian pastor and feminist, Sarah Bessey, posted a couple of tweets under #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear. The hashtag went viral, as Christian women – mainly but not only American evangelicals – shared their experiences. Some of the comments included:

- “You are an amazing leader! You'd make an excellent pastor's wife someday!”
- “Biblical Womanhood can be defined by marriage and motherhood.”
- “If the pastor fell into sin and raped you it was you who seduced and tempted him.”
- “You and your husband are equals, but he makes the final decisions in your marriage.”
- “Your clothes can cause boys to sin” (said to twelve year old girls)
- “If you stay with your abuser, you might bring him to the Lord.”
- “You're being abused? Well, here's a book on how to be a better wife.”
- “You're egalitarian? ... Umm, are you still a Christian?”
- “You are looking at this from a woman's perspective and I am seeing things from a person's perspective.”
- “You're a Christian feminist? Good luck finding a husband!” *cackles*
- “Maybe people will listen to you if you stop sounding so angry.”

- “The women's issue is not a primary issue that concerns the church.”

Into this twittering chorus comes another woman to set the record straight. Julia Jeffress Saddler is a ‘Girls’ Ministry Director’ and a licenced professional counsellor. She blogs: ²

To be told the truth of the Bible is not oppressive; it is freeing. So, for clarification, here are Biblical foundations about the sayings women claimed the Church used to offend and to oppress them:

Women Are Not Preachers.

Titus 3:2 “Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness ... He must manage his family well.”

These are the Biblical requirements for an overseer or what is now called “pastor.” He is a man first of all. ... [J]ust because this biblical truth is hard to accept does not mean I get to decide it doesn't apply. The Bible clearly states that the role of pastor is for a man.

Women Should be Modest.

1 Timothy 2:9 “Likewise also women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control.”

As Christian women, we are responsible for how we dress. Just like anything else, this is a direct reflection upon our relationship with the Lord. This is a calling, a charge, a protection, and a command from our Creator. God loves women and wants to protect us.

So, issues of gender, feminism and the roles and rights of women constitute one of the major challenges facing the churches today, and the moral panic that surrounds these issues poses deep questions about the meaning of our faith.

In what follows, I consider various scriptural and theological approaches to the relationship between feminism and faith. I hope to persuade you that feminism is a friend of faith, when engaged with discerningly from an informed scriptural and theological perspective. Indeed, I’d go further to speculate that perhaps only Christianity makes feminism coherent and legitimate, even if it’s only in secular society that the full vision of human equality enshrined in the Gospel finds space to grow. Feminism can help the Christian faith to become more not less true to itself, but it also exposes how deeply rooted patriarchy is in the Christian tradition, and has been from the beginning.

Looking Differently, Seeing Difference – the Lenses of Gender

American psychologist Sandra Lipsitz Bem wrote an influential book in the early 1990s titled *The Lenses of Gender*.³ She argues that we have to look at instead of through the lenses of gender, in order to recognise the extent to which gendered hierarchies and stereotypes condition our world view. This evening, I want to look at the lenses of gender through which we view issues of identity, relationality and God. I’m focusing on feminism and therefore

bracketing out wider issues of gender and sexual rights – including same-sex relations, transgender and intersex issues, not because I think these are less important, but because I think they blur the focus. When the female body is still the most universal marker of difference and otherness in our world – most vulnerable to sexual abuse, economic exploitation, violence, trafficking, domestic violence and the deadly combination of poverty and procreation, female embodiment matters. When being identified as female remains the most universal placeholder for roles of subordination, servitude and exploitation in our world, I make no apologies for focusing on feminism.

However, just as there are many different forms of Christianity, so there are many different forms of feminism. A pro-choice liberal feminist taking her stance on autonomy and rights is unlikely to find much common ground with a conservative Christian – male or female – who thinks that heterosexuality is the litmus test for inclusion among the baptised, wifely subordination is the marital ideal, and abortion is the single greatest evil facing humankind. There are fights not worth having, and feminism and Christianity are indeed foes when viewed from these absolutist positions at either end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, in between there is a long continuum of complex, sometimes conflicting, sometimes confusing, perspectives afforded by both feminism and faith, which can provide fertile ground for encounter, dialogue and mutual transformation.

My approach is informed to some extent by philosophers who follow in the footsteps of Alasdair MacIntyre. Our modern pluralist cultures position us in ways where the narratives that give meaning to life intersect and sometimes contradict one another. If I encounter a world view that profoundly challenges my own, I have a responsibility to grapple with this dilemma until I discover a credible and justifiable position which allows me to align myself with one position rather than another, even if that position is now deeply influenced by the other. For me, that's the relationship I discover in grappling with my own Catholic faith – as a theologian – and the claims and insights that feminism offers. Can my faith engage with feminism, provide responses to the challenges of feminism, and adapt in such a way that it remains coherent but also finds some consistency between feminism and faith? What light does feminism cast on my faith, and at what point might I discover an irreconcilable conflict between the two? In that situation, which do I ultimately choose? In reality, things are seldom so clear cut – though sometimes they are. You can't be simultaneously for and against Brexit. You can't vote for and vote against Donald Trump. There are times in life when we have to weigh up informed alternatives and be decisive.

For me, one of the core questions feminism poses to Christianity is that of autonomy, and that's where I begin – and I begin at the beginning, with the Book of Genesis.

Autonomy and Patriarchy

A few years ago, Amnesty International ran a campaign under the slogan 'My Body, My Rights', with the strapline, 'Being able to make our own decisions about our health, body and sexual life is a basic human right.'⁴ The main focus of that campaign was sexual and reproductive rights, including abortion rights. I don't want to focus on abortion tonight. Rather, I want to consider what autonomy might mean, for a Christian who is also a feminist.

Autonomy creates a sense that my body is my own possession, but no Christian can claim absolute ownership of his or her body, because I am my body, and my bodily life is a gift, not a possession. In other words, there is no 'I' who could own my body, because there is no 'I'

who is other than my body. I did not choose to be born, I did not choose to be me in all the unique and particular circumstances of my life that give me my identity. However, as a Christian feminist I find myself reflecting on the nature of autonomy, and I realize that subtly but all-pervasively, Christianity has perpetuated ancient property systems that see a man's wife and children as his possessions. Let me refer to Genesis.

The story of Genesis 1 – the human, male and female, created in the image of God – is a creation narrative that implies no sexual hierarchy but full and equal mutuality and equality of the gendered human creature. However, Genesis 2 has been the dominant creation myth referred to in the Christian tradition, and it has been read in a way that makes the man Adam primary and authoritative, and the woman Eve derivative and subordinate. Add into that the interpretation that attributes original sin to Eve's seduction of Adam, and you have a heady brew to perpetuate patriarchal power as God's will for humankind:

1 CORINTHIANS 11: 7-9

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. (1 Cor. 11: 7-9).

1 TIMOTHY 2: 11

A woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. (1 Tim. 2:11)

From biblical times until the twentieth century, nobody seriously challenged these interpretations. There are libraries full of scriptural scholarship; since the nineteenth century much of this scholarship has been driven by the imperatives of historical and textual objectivity and rigour as opposed to theologically motivated readings seeking divine inspiration. Yet it was only with the rise of feminist biblical scholars such as Phyllis Trible from the late 1970s that any serious and sustained challenge was posed to these accounts, by going back to the Hebrew texts and asking what they actually say.⁵

The first human creature in Genesis 2 was not a man called Adam but an earthling – *'ādām* – a common noun that evokes associations with blood (*dām*) and soil (*'ādāmāh*). Gender only becomes a clear and unambiguous marker of difference with the creation of woman – *'iššā*, in the company of whom the original earthling becomes male – *'iš*. In fact, it's even more complex than that, because the Hebrew words for biological male and female mammals – *zākār* and *neqēbā* – are used to describe the creation of male and female in Genesis 1:27. The words *'iš* and *'iššā* are associated more with gender and kinship than with sex and anatomy. They are social rather than anatomical designations – but I don't have time to unpack all that tonight.

When God decides to create a companion for the earthling *hā-'ādām*, the term used is *'ēzer kenegdōw*. The word *'ēzer* is most commonly used in the Hebrew scriptures to refer to God's relationship to Israel. When used in conjunction with *kenegdōw*, it implies a companion who, to quote Trible, 'alleviates isolation through identity'.⁶

When the earth creature first encounters this companion, his utterance is one of recognition, not appropriation. He recognises her as woman, but he does not call her by name as he does

with the animals. Only after the fruit has been eaten does the Hebrew use the naming formula that asserts his ownership and authority over her. He calls her by the name, *ḥawwāh*, but even that name is ambiguous. Its closest equivalent would be an association with life or the living, and again it's a word that implies kinship. However, in this account the naming formula implies possession. It's as if a cat wandered in here and I said, 'Oh look, there's a cat.' That's recognising what it is. If I then say, 'I'm going to call it Cleo,' I've laid claim to it. It's my cat, to name as I please.

The point I'm making is that those Pauline injunctions based on a patriarchal reading of Genesis make Christianity complicit in the perpetuation of a patriarchal order in which women's bodies are owned and controlled by men claiming that their authority comes from God in the order of creation. From the beginning, Christian readings of Genesis are written by looking through and not at the gendered relationships of the surrounding status quo. Paul finds justification for rather than a challenge to existing social norms. Then as now, perhaps it would be too dangerous, too radical, for Christianity to provoke a sexual revolution! Only with the rise of feminist biblical and theological scholarship has this tradition been challenged, not by rejecting the Bible but by excavating its negated and distorted meanings. Feminism enriches scriptural interpretation, not by calling into question the authority of scripture, but by asking what it means to claim such authority with regard to questions of translation, interpretation and meaning.

Using those Pauline texts as a starting point, we can track Christian patriarchy through the ages and find that the justifications and explanations change, but the hierarchies remain the same. At the heart of many of the issues most dividing the churches today is the patriarchal belief that the heterosexual male is the only rightful heir to divine authority in the earthly realm – a hierarchy that filters down from God the Father through institutions of monarchy and political and religious governance to the domestic realm of the family. This hierarchical order insinuates itself into Christian theology from the beginning. Consider Ephesians 3:14-15: 'For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.' The patriarchal significance is lost in translation, because in Greek, the word for family – *patria* – derives from the word for father – *pater*. And this patriarchal interpretation gains added impetus if we read on to Ephesians 5: 22-24: 'Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.'

By the time of Thomas Aquinas, Aristotelian philosophy had been co-opted to lend philosophical as well as scriptural support to this patriarchal order. Thomas writes:

the father should be loved more than the mother. For father and mother are loved as principles of our natural origin. Now the father is principle in a more excellent way than the mother, because he is the active principle, while the mother is a passive and material principle. Consequently, strictly speaking, the father is to be loved more. In the begetting of man, the mother supplies the formless matter of the body; and the latter receives its form through the formative power that is in the semen of the father. And though this power cannot create the rational soul, yet it disposes the matter of the body to receive that form.⁷

We might reject Thomas's anachronistic science, but even if the underpinning science has changed, the status quo remains the same. The reformers with their appeal to *sola scriptura*

rejected the medieval synthesis between theology and philosophy, reason and revelation, but the status quo remains the same. Consider, for example, this advice from an evangelical pastor's blog, speaking about Ephesians 5:

The issue of authority and submission in marriage should not come up very often. A loving, sensitive husband will not force his wife to do anything against God's will, and he will not push her into anything distasteful or harmful to her. He will never assert his authority to get his own way. When there are disagreements, they should be worked through calmly in love. In making decisions, a wise husband will solicit and carefully weigh his wife's insights, so that most decisions will be mutually agreed on. . . . Only rarely, and after much communication and prayer, should a husband need to exercise his authority against his wife's point-of-view. If and when that happens, he needs to do it with fear and trembling before God, recognizing that he will be held accountable by God for his decision. At all times he should have God's glory and his wife's spiritual, physical, and emotional well-being as his goal.

Of course, submission is easier, wives, when your husband is loving and gentle, and when you agree with him. It's not easy when he is not being godly or when you disagree with him. You should never obey your husband if it means disobeying a clear command of God. But even then, you can display a submissive attitude ("a gentle and quiet spirit," 1 Pet. 3:4) and appeal to him out of love and respect. Your goal should be always to glorify God and to build your husband.⁸

Underlying all conservative forms of Christianity, there is the patriarchal belief that the woman belongs to the man and the man has the divine right and indeed duty to rule the woman. In the Catholic Church to which I belong, this manifests itself in the prohibition against women's ordination on the one hand, and in the fact that a small elite of celibate men claims divine authority to control women's sexual and reproductive bodies on the other. In evangelical churches, it takes the form of a narrow and literal interpretation of some scriptural verses, usually taken out of context and given a literal weight that is rarely given to other verses that have to do with poverty and wealth, with persecution and humility. The missionary position is the defining norm of all cultural, religious and social relationships, including those affected by Christianity – the man must always be on top. These structures are too pervasive and too deeply rooted to be changed simply by a few churches adopting inclusive language and ordaining women. As the scandals currently rocking the sexual politics of the secular world reveal, fifty years of rhetoric and cosmetic change have masked the symptoms but have not cured the causes of what can only be called a culture of toxic masculinity.

Feminism exposes the dynamics of these social and sexual hierarchies. It uncovers the projections and distortions, the inequalities that persist beneath the rhetoric of equality and rights. We have to enter into that struggle for meaning to which MacIntyre refers, even within the scriptures themselves.

So we might set alongside those Pauline injunctions the baptismal formula of Galatians 3:

GALATIANS 3: 26-28

In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither

slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:26-28)

This suggests that the transformation of the self that comes about when we are baptised into the body of Christ is a transformation at the level of all the sexual, social, ethnic and economic structures that allow one human being to claim superiority or domination over another. Yet as the early Church evolved, sexual equality became too hot to handle. By the time the later baptismal formula of Colossians is recorded, one fundamental marker of the baptised has been edited out:

COLOSSIANS 3: 11

Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

In struggling with the idea of liberal autonomy, including its feminist interpretations, we can gain new insight into who we are in the eyes of God, society and the law. No, I am not an absolute autonomous agent, because I am first and foremost a gift of embodied life from God, but God gives that life to me and to no one else. Nobody has the right to claim ownership of my bodily life, to possess me as a slave, a wife, a commodity, an object. I am answerable only to God, in my own conscience and in the decisions I make. Through the ages, women have discovered great potency as they have discovered that they can communicate directly with God, without going through male authority figures. The Virgin Mary is perhaps the shining example of the transformative power of a woman who is outside all patriarchal control, but the medieval mystics also laid claim to such divinely inspired authority and insight.

However, the idea of individual autonomy has to be set alongside another equally important theological insight, and that is the nature of the human person as essentially relational, social and interdependent. We are, in the words of Aquinas, social animals. If liberal feminism tends to emphasise the importance of individual autonomy, there are many feminist ethicists who are more interested in exploring the idea of relationality and interdependence as a resource for challenging the social and sexual injustices of our time. For some, this includes reflection on maternal ethics – on the maternal body as an elusive but potent resource for reflecting on what it means to be a person who is not reducible to a single individual, for there is another within who blurs the boundaries of self and other.

The Trinitarian Self

For me, this leads to theological reflection on the Trinity. If, in the order of creation, the woman is created in the image of God simultaneously with the man and both stand as equals before God, we are also created from the beginning as triadic – the gendered couple and the Trinitarian God in whose image Christianity says we are made. So when Christians speak about the *imago Dei*, we should really refer to the *imago Trinitatis*. Again, for me, feminism invites reflection on Trinitarian theology in this context.

To approach questions of relationality and otherness in the context of feminism is to be alert to the extent to which these concepts have traditionally been projected onto women. It's the man who takes up the position of the autonomous self, and the woman who takes up the position of the one who cares and defines herself in terms of relationality rather than individualism. In an essay written in the early 1960s, now widely acknowledged as a

pioneering work in feminist theology, Valerie Saiving argues that the Christian understanding of sin needs to take account of how sins of pride and ambition are primarily masculine sins, whereas feminine sins might have more to do with self-abasement and even self-loathing. Saiving writes: '[A] woman can give too much of herself, so that nothing remains of her own uniqueness; she can become merely an emptiness, almost a zero, without value to herself, to her fellow men, or, perhaps, even to God.'⁹

Psychologist Carol Gilligan, writing in the early 1980s, observes that:

Listening to women talk about moral conflict and choice, and about themselves in relation to others, I have observed that women tend to translate the abstract language of moral discourse into the vernacular of human relationships. This is usually grounds for criticizing women's moral thinking, i.e. for saying that women confuse moral problems with problems of interpersonal relationships. But the very 'confusion' is revealing. The two moral languages, of self-interest and self-sacrifice, came to be labelled as 'selfish' and 'selfless' by women. And the criticism of these two words, indeed a criticism of the very polarity of self-interest and self-sacrifice, is that they both exclude relationship. Selfish means excluding the other, and selfless implies excluding the self, which creates a special problem with moral choice, since there is then no self, actor, or agent in the situation of choice. ... There is no relationship if others are not present in their own terms, or if the self is silenced.¹⁰

This poses a challenge to all of us, female and male, to find a more creative way to navigate between our legitimate rights as individuals, and the responsibilities of relational interdependence. So with that in mind, how might we engage in a feminist critique and reinterpretation of Trinitarian theology?

I want to suggest that the Trinity – the Christian doctrine that God is a unity of three persons in a dynamic, creative and eternal circularity of love that generates and encompasses creation – is a mystery within which the Christian self can grow into a relational autonomy. However, this entails confronting the central problem – is not patriarchy enshrined at the heart of Trinitarian relationships? Two blokes and a bird – the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit hovering in the wings as an elusive masculinised third?

In my research, I became impatient early on with the political rhetoric of liberal feminism, which I see as an overly simplistic approach to questions of language. To reverse the terms of reference – to call God Father instead of Mother, She instead of He, will get us nowhere. It simply reverses the dualisms without deconstructing them or questioning their oppressive power. If God is a Mother, that leaves the patriarchal fathers to continue with business as usual. But also, I agree with those who argue that, like it or not, the whole Christian tradition is predicated upon the Trinitarian relationship by way of which Father, Son and Holy Spirit communicate the divine love among themselves and draw us in by desire to participate in that love.

My argument is that, far from shoring up the patriarchal status quo, God the Father of Jesus Christ deconstructs it and calls out a holy community that is distinguished from the rest of society by its Trinitarian equality in difference among persons. To say this means several things, each of which requires far more theological unpacking than I can do this evening, so let me just list them.

I've quoted Thomas Aquinas's defence of patriarchy, in which he projects Aristotelian science onto God and then uses this to shore up the social order. In medieval science, the copulative relationship between form and matter was the very essence and possibility of existence. Paternal form inseminated maternal matter, and thus created beings come into being. There is no support in scripture for this essentially pagan view of divinity. The Hebrew word '*bara*' that is used for creation in Genesis 1 is a verb only used in the context of divine initiative and activity. God evokes a meaningful creation out of nothing.

But Aquinas also recognises – even though he often forgets himself – that all language about God is analogical. God is far beyond any concepts or words that we humans might use to describe or define God, and therefore we must always allow a destabilising uncertainty to haunt our speech about God. We can, says Aquinas, better say what God is not than what God is.

And in fact, Thomas's Trinity is maternal through and through. His preferred analogy for speaking of relationships within the Trinity is that of maternal conception and birth. In a lengthy passage from his commentary on Boethius, he attributes to Jesus the feminised persona of wisdom, and to God the maternal role of bringing wisdom to birth.

The matter of this work is the Trinity of Persons in the one, divine essence, that Trinity which has its source in the primal nativity in which divine wisdom is eternally generated by the Father: 'The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived' (Prov. 8:24), and 'This day have I begotten you' (Ps. 2:7)

This nativity is the beginning of every other nativity, as it is the only one involving perfect participation in the nature of the generator: but all others are imperfect according as the one generated receives either a part of the substance of the generator, or only a similitude: from this it follows that from the aforesaid nativity, every other is derived by a kind of imitation; and thus: 'Of whom all paternity in heaven and in earth is named' (Eph. 3:15); and on this account the Son is called the first-born of every creature (Col. 1:15) so that the origin of nativity and its imitation might be designated, but not according to the same meaning of generation; and therefore it is aptly said: 'I will seek her out from the beginning of her birth.' 'The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his ways' (Prov. 8:22); for not only of creatures is the aforesaid nativity the beginning, but even of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Generator and the Generated.

Aquinas also argues that, while we can never find a perfect way of expressing the divine mystery, the language of relationships is the most appropriate language to use. God is only the Father because Jesus is the Son, and Jesus is only the Son because God is the Father. These are words that derive their meaning not from the individual nor from any inseminating analogy but from the relationship between the one and the other. Father, Son and Holy Spirit designate relationships, not individuals.

If we take seriously Jesus's words, that those who have seen me have seen the Father, then we must say that the only language we can meaningfully use of God the Father is language that derives from the incarnation – from the divine revelation that we are capable of experiencing because God becomes human and enters the sensory, tangible, experiential world of human understanding. So what does fatherhood in God look like? It looks like the newborn infant feeding at Mary's breast. It looks like the man who ate and drank and wept

and treated the women around him as equals, friends and disciples. It looks like the man who made himself a servant and washed his disciples' feet. It looks like the victim tortured and crucified on the cross. It looks like the risen Christ who appeared first to Mary Magdalene, and who cooked breakfast for his bewildered disciples. Nowhere in Jesus's earthly ministry does he show us a patriarchal Father. From his coming into being in a virgin's womb, all patriarchal power was excluded from this divine mystery.

What might the Christian community have become, what might the Church look like today, if our distinctiveness lay in our radical equality, in the motherly expression of Trinitarian love shared among us? What would masculinity mean, in a Church that took seriously the *imago Trinitatis* – the end of the autonomous masculine individual and the coming into being of the new self in Christ – a relational, interpersonal way of being which draws us into a baptismal community in which there is neither male nor female, Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, for you are all one in Christ Jesus?

And finally, let me suggest that the transformative consequences of this revelation of God in Christ are hidden in plain sight in the Gospels, which are unique in all the texts of the ancient world in the central, authoritative status they accord to women.

From beginning to end, Christianity puts 'woman' at the centre of the story of salvation. I've already suggested that traditional Christian interpretations of Genesis – looking through rather than at the lenses of gender – have produced readings that have supported the status quo by imposing meanings that are not clear in the Hebrew texts. It's also worth pointing out that the attribution of fatherhood to God is rare – though not unknown – in Hebrew scripture. It's Jesus who introduces the idea of the divine fatherhood as the focus of his faith and ours.

At all the most decisive moments in the Christian story, it's a woman's voice that constitutes the authoritative source, the defining event. In the Garden of Eden, it's Eve who deliberates, weighs up the options, and makes the decision. The man is with her and he eats, but she's the authoritative figure. Fast track forward to the New Testament. The incarnation begins with the virginal conception of Jesus. Mary speaks, and it's Mary's yes that reconciles the world to God. She is the Mother of God – for Protestants as well as Catholics – because Jesus does not become God when he dies. He is God incarnate from conception, and therefore we must say that it's the incarnation, not the cross, that constitutes the healing of the wound that separates the material creation from its creator. The biological father, the patriarch, is excluded from the conception of Christ. Not only that, but in the conception of John the Baptist, the priest Zechariah is struck dumb because he dared to question of the angel – which amuses me because it seems Mary also questioned but she was graciously answered! The good news is first told to the world when two pregnant women – Mary and Elizabeth – greet one another and Mary's Magnificat initiates what will become the retelling of the story of her Son through the eyes of the Hebrew prophets and the Hebrew scriptures. Mary sings the song of Hannah, mother of Samuel, and she becomes the first ever Christian theologian, the first to theologise the meaning of the incarnation. And both these women are tasked with naming their children. If the man deprived the woman of her equality and mutuality when he named her in Genesis, does God restore the power of naming to women in the incarnation? Jump forward again to the public ministry of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels. The Syro-Phoenician woman, the Samaritan woman at the well, the mother of Jesus at the wedding at Cana, Martha and Mary, all these and more are the witnesses, interpreters and followers of Jesus. The male disciples get things wrong, they're rebuked, they often don't seem to get it. Not so the women. They get it every time. They are the ones to whom Jesus reveals himself

most fully, most often. And the resurrection is witnessed only by women. In John's Gospel, Mary Magdalene becomes the apostle to the apostles, the first person ever to tell the Good News of the Risen Christ.

If we want to universalise the good news – that Jesus comes to set captives free, to heal the broken-hearted, to restore humankind to the grace and joy of God and creation to harmony with the creator, then should we not expect this message to speak first and foremost to and through those who are the most universally subjugated in all cultures in all eras? If so, then the healing and liberation of girls and women will be the first sign of the Kingdom of God among us, and that sign is everywhere in the earthly ministry of Jesus. Jesus reaches out to heal the female body and to liberate it from its shame. The woman with an issue of blood – a woman whose gynaecological bleeding would have led to her social ostracisation – is healed when she defies the purity laws and touches Jesus's robe. She interrupts him on his mission to raise Jairus's daughter – Luke's Gospel tells us that she was about 12 - a girl on the brink of womanhood, about to suffer the same social death that comes with menstruation, the impurity of childbirth, the association of the female body with sex, death and pollution. The Syro-Phoenician woman comes to Jesus begging him to free her daughter of the demon of an impure spirit, in an encounter that Mark's Gospel situates immediately after a discourse on purity and pollution. The Syro-Phoenician woman, like the Samaritan woman at the well, is a double outsider – an other in relation to Jesus in terms of both her religion and her gender. Time and again, the story of Jesus Christ is the story of the female body restored to wholeness.

So my point is that there is something going on around the significance of women for the story of Christ, which we have not even begun to understand or explore in terms of theological development. It's a vision of radical transformation predicated upon the universally subservient position of women, and hidden in plain sight within the scriptures.

If Christianity had been true to the revelation entrusted to it, there would never have been a debate about women's ordination, about female subordination and wifely submission. From the beginning, there would have been a community of equals as living witness to that lovely mark of identity in 1 John – the love that Christians have for one another.

But I find it difficult to say that, without adding a caveat. We are not perfect, and each of us is on a lifelong learning curve. Cardinal Newman said that "To live is to change, and to be perfect is to change often." Love is not blind, and nor does it ignore deep conflict and division. In the Catholic Church, the drive to maintain an appearance of unity among the Church's leaders continues to fuel a sex scandal that shows no signs of abating or being properly addressed. In a world in which Donald Trump has become the emblem of Christian leadership for many, Christian unity may not be the highest ideal. There comes a time when we have to say, not in my name. Autonomy sometimes takes precedence over relationality, when we are being drawn into relationships that kill and destroy.

The path to unity is a difficult struggle. We're living in the now and not yet of the Kingdom of Heaven. Heaven is here, within us and around us all the time for those who take time to be instead of always doing. But the Christian faith doesn't make us a radiant community of equals aglow with the Trinitarian love of God. If it did, people would want to convert for all the wrong reasons. God is conceived within us, and we have to nurture that fragile life and give it space to grow and to be birthed, and of course we get things wrong. There will always be abuse and scandal in the Church, there will always be patriarchs as well as prophets,

sinners as well as saints, wheat and tares, sheep and goats, inseparable from one another. Nevertheless, each of us can decide for ourselves where we stand and what we stand for, how we interpret scripture and how we give meaning to our lives.

I've tried to suggest ways in which feminism can enrich and deepen a Christian understanding of scripture and theology. To answer my initial question – friend or foe? My answer is critical but necessary friend.

¹ Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl Wudunn, *Half the Sky: How to Change the World* (London: Virago Press, 2010 [2009]).

² <https://www.christianpost.com/news/biblical-truth-things-only-christian-women-hear-twitter-trend-181778/>

³ Sandra Lipsitz Bem, *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

⁴ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/get-involved/my-body-my-rights/>

⁵ The following analysis of Genesis is taken from a paper I gave at the University of Lund, Sweden, in December 2016, subsequently published as 'Gendering Genesis Engendering Difference: a Catholic Theological Quest' in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*. Årg. 92 (2017): 102-117.

⁶ Phyllis Trible, 'A Love Story Gone Awry' in *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1978): 72-143, p. 90.

⁷ ST II-II, 26, 10.

⁸ <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-3-what-do-you-mean-submit-ephesians-521-24>

⁹ Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds), *WomanSpirit Rising – A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992): 25-42, 43.

¹⁰ Carol Gilligan, 'A Different Voice in Moral Decisions' in Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain (eds.), *Speaking of Faith: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Women, Religion and Social Change* (London: The Women's Press, 1986): 221-229