Finding Tradition, Founding Modernity: 
The History and Relevance of Feminist Theology in a Secular Society

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From a basic perspective, Christianity is a set of moral teachings that preaches to its followers the practice of love, charity, and forgiveness. To define Christianity by its morality, however, would be to assimilate it with humanism.\(^1\) The religious aspect of Christianity, then, is the belief in Jesus Christ, a divine being whose gender has long been viewed as male, who descended from Heaven to save humankind from the mortal sins of Eve, the first of all women.\(^2\) The inherent tradition of Christianity that perceives God and Christ as male has served to equate and suppress the woman's questioning of social order as “disobedience of God”\(^3\); Christianity in modern secular thought is perceived to be inherently patriarchal by nature,\(^4\) descending from a misogynistic tradition. If religion is indeed patriarchal by nature, then perhaps the feminist break with Christianity was inevitable. The neo-secular shift in the West is often equated to the “modernisation” of ideologies in both language and scholarship alike, thus feminism may be seen as a product of modernism, and ultimately incompatible with a seemingly traditional theology. The intrinsic misogyny of most religions isolates secularism as the obvious alliance of ideology for feminism. While paraphrasing the title of Sherry Ortner’s 1972 essay, art historian Griselda Pollock asks, “is feminism to Judaism as modernity is to tradition?”\(^5\) With this title Pollock acknowledges the bifurcated relationship between feminism, Judaism (or religion), modernity, and tradition. According to Niamh Reilly, this widely-accepted bifurcation in the West has led to the belief that the diminished relevance of religion

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\(^1\) Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 4-5.
\(^3\) Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 3.
\(^4\) Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 75.
in the public sphere is a defining characteristic of “modern” society. As feminism is widely considered to be a part of this “modern” consciousness, secularism has largely constituted the obvious ideological choice for those self-identifying as “feminist”.

Yet, secularism does not be the “death knell” of Christianity: if the mutual exclusion between modernism vs. tradition, and feminism vs. religion, is absolute, feminist theologians are a paradox in their very existence. In their paradoxical presence, feminist theologians are trying to find a place for religion in the lives of women in ways that align with feminist goals of emancipation and equality. Feminist theology works against the grain of both contemporary and mainstream types of feminism, which promote secularism as their preferred system of belief (or non-belief), as well as conventional theological beliefs, which elevate the male above the female in the experience of spirituality. While feminist theologians are focused greatly on the present and future, working to subvert contemporary, mainstream feminist and theological ideologies, the concept of feminist theology can trace its roots to the liminal and long-standing tradition of medieval and early-modern women asserting their place in the Church. This topic has remained largely unexplored, but in recent years, however, academia has brought to the fore the gendered and female experiences of medieval spirituality, as well as “gender reversals” in the lives of male saints of the pre-modern era. By reading between the lines of material evidence and conventional approaches to ontology and sociology, feminist historian-theologians have been able to highlight the lack of internal consistency of the historical experience of Christianity, while producing historiographical criticisms of broad assumptions previously made about what came before the modern experience.

In my brief attempt to reconstruct the fragmented tradition of feminist theology in the history of the Christian Church, I will first address the present misogyny in the Christian tradition, before

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6 Niamh Reilly, “Rethinking the Interplay of Feminism and Secularism in a Neo-Secular Age,” in Feminist Review 97, 7.
7 Hampson, Theology and Feminism, 1.
investigating a variety of texts to determine the roots and parallels of modern-day feminist-theological thought to the late medieval and early modern periods. I will then explore the mediating response to the postmodern, neo-secular feminisms by examining and comparing some of the different methods in which feminist theologians are reconciling the emancipation of women with the supposed legitimacy of male authority in Christianity. Such efforts include bringing into plain sight the voices and experiences of women hidden away by the Church, facilitating the integration between the fields of feminism and theology as well as other academic disciplines, and the “feminisation” of theology that “synthesises” the experience of women\(^9\) into the Christian story.\(^{10}\)

The Gospels, arguably the most important theological text in Christianity, begin with the Virgin Mary. Her qualities of obedience, chastity, and silence have been long-extolled by the Church as the ideal qualities befitting a woman.\(^{11}\) As well, Mary’s task, assigned by her male God through the male Angel Gabriel, is that of motherhood, the only vocational norm of women traditionally revered throughout Church history. Moreover, there are examples from the Bible which stand in contrast to and serve as a warning against any woman who questioned her marginality in the Church.\(^{12}\) For example, St. Paul the Apostle’s teaching in which men are instructed to “let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted to them to speak.”\(^{13}\) Nearly two millennia later, the Christian goal of imitatio Christi (“Imitation of Christ”) is still being appropriated by the Catholic Church to legitimise its refusal to place women in governance roles: “the example of Christ choosing his Apostles only from among men, and the constant practice of the Church, which has


\(^{10}\) Though feminist theology is far from unique to Christianity, I have limited my discussion to the scope of Western-Christian feminist theologies, as to not implicate complex notions of imperialism, colonialism, or Orientalism of Western intervention in “third-world” feminisms and theologies.

\(^{11}\) Warner, 179-180.


\(^{13}\) 1 Corinthians 14:34.
imitated Christ in choosing only men” was invoked by the late Pope John Paul II in 1994, when the Holy See wrote to its cardinals about the Anglican Church’s decision to ordain women as priests. The antique authority of the Bible and its seemingly-impenetrable “tradition” have long served to brand any woman questioning her subservience in the Church as “anti-orthodoxy” (“orthodoxy” meaning the correct Christian doctrine, rather than Orthodox Christianity). Since the 1970s, both male and female fundamentalist authors have cited numerous Biblical passages to undermine and subvert feminism, without distinguishing between different feminist schools of thought or showing the slightest recognition of its value or validity. The conventional Christian responses to feminism have created a divide; on one side has emerged a pugnacious and radical form of “feminism” that endangers the Christian gender hierarchy put in place by God, and on the other side a group which assumes any adherent of the feminist label to be “anti-God.” As a result, if a woman was unable to reconcile her questions with the supposed orthodoxy of gender hierarchy, she turned—or she was made, by socio-religious pressures—“secular.” Here, it should be made clear that my use of the term “secularism” differs from that of Grace Davie and Linda Woodhead, who define it as “an ideology... which actively opposes religion.” Instead, I am using “secular” to mean “nonreligious” rather than “anti-religious,” encompassing non-religiosity, atheism, agnosticism, or pluralism as well as non-descriptive or apathetic religiosity outside the realm of terminology.

The beginnings of feminism in its recognisable modern form is markedly secular: when women first began petitioning for equal rights in England during the reign of Charles I (1629-45),

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Bathsua Makin encouraged her fellow women to educate themselves in Antique learning, including Latin, classical lore, and the arts,\(^\text{17}\) rather than stories of biblical women or the *vitae* (“life”) of female saints. Early feminist movements were indeed steered towards the legislative fight for the right to vote and to own land, centuries before the petition for the right to be ordained. As the Christian authority became less and less prominent—or at least less visibly so—in policy, legislation, healthcare or education,\(^\text{18}\) and as society embraced a range of religions besides Christianity, the idea of religion as an aspect of life needing—or even desiring—feminist intervention became further estranged. Underscored by the inheritance of this early secular tradition and aided by the new normativity of secularism,\(^\text{19}\) third-wave feminists experienced a new freedom to live without religiosity rather than having to subscribe to a defined system of belief.

A 2010 study of religion and spirituality of third-wave feminists in the United Kingdom, conducted by Kristin Aune, showed only a marginal interest in religion, with a mere 0.06 per cent of respondents including “spiritual/religious” feminism in their areas of interest, while “atheist” was the most popular self-designated religiosity, at 39.4 per cent.\(^\text{20}\) In the big picture of third-wave feminism, this study sums up the position of feminist theology as “profoundly countercultural.”\(^\text{21}\) In addition, feminist theology is marked countercultural not only to mainstream feminism but also to mainstream theology. There can be no denying that the history of the Church in the past two millennia has been inherently patristic; and yet, the patriarchal subjugation of women during the medieval and early modern periods was not without resistance from notable female writers of theology during that time: despite the previous evidence pointing to the secular nature of feminism, the proto-feminist dissent against the tradition of androcentric theology can be traced back to the Middle Ages, most notably in

\(^{17}\) Walters, 17.
\(^{19}\) Reilly, 5.
the pioneering thought and work of Hildegard of Bingen, an extremely well-learned twelfth-century German Benedictine abbess and mystic.

Though it is seemingly anachronistic to apply the “feminist” label to one who preceded the 1895 coining of the term\(^22\) by seven centuries, it is equally striking and disheartening to see how little the language of feminism has changed in that time: advocating for the validity of her own visions to her male superiors,\(^23\) Hildegard wrote, “woman may be made from man, but no man can be made without a woman.”\(^24\)

Then in the early modern period, Moderata Fonte—the *nom de plume* (pen name) of the sixteenth-century Venetian author Modesta Pozzo—sought to subvert the Bible in order to redistribute the weight of the Original Sin between man *and* woman. Pozzo did so with wit and humour:

> It was with a good end in mind—that of acquiring the knowledge of good and evil—that Eve allowed herself to… eat the forbidden fruit. But Adam was not moved by this desire… but simply by greed: he ate it because he heard Eve say it tasted good, which… caused more displeasure [of God].\(^25\)

Fonte goes beyond mere subversion of the Bible and encourages her fellow women to seek emancipation, by rejecting the “marriage-or-nunnery” convention of the Renaissance in preference of taking control of one’s own dowry.\(^26\) More than two centuries later and notable similarities can still be found between Fonte's writings and first-wave feminism. In her work, *The Woman's Bible* (1895), Elizabeth Cady Stanton's sums up the misogynistic positions of the Bible on marriage that promulgate the secondary position of women, by highlighting the harshness of the woman’s burden:


\(^{25}\) Fonte, 165, 217.

\(^{26}\) Moderata Fonte, *The Worth of Women: Wherein is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Superiority to Men* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 60, 94.
Woman brought sin and death into the world... she precipitated the fall of the race, [and] she was arraigned before the judgement seat of Heaven, tried, condemned and sentenced. Marriage... was to be a condition of bondage, maternity a period of suffering and in silence and subjection... she was to play the role of a dependent on man's bounty for all her material wants, and for all the information she might desire on the vital questions of the hour, she was commanded to ask her husband at home.27

Sojourner Truth, a freed slave and contemporary of Stanton, rallied against the misogyny in America by appealing to the role of Mary in the Incarnation: “That little man there... says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him!”28 Sojourner’s upbringing as a slave, combined with the inaccessibility of works by the likes of Hildegard and Fonte, render it unlikely that she would have been familiar with the feminist-theological polemics of early-modern Europe. Nor are Hildegard and Fonte the rarest of exceptions in the survey of history; rather, they are but two examples pulled from a sizeable inventory of late-Medieval and early-modern women, including: Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe of England, Mary d'Oignies of Belgium, Veronica Franco and Laura Cereta of Italy, and Louise Labé of France. Each of these women paved the way for what we see in retrospect as “proto-feminism,” by creating an alternative, non-conforming religiosity for women.

In the Christian woman's devotional life, I would argue, there has existed an innate desire to mediate, ease, and subvert the oppressive doctrine of patriarchy and integrate herself into the tradition of Christianity, with the aid of her own human experiences. The innateness of this desire is demonstrated by the remarkable range and diversity in education, socio-economic status, epoch, and geographical location of these early feminist theologians. Moreover, this desire is not exclusive to feminist theology: Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan’s works shed light on the long history of the oppressed seeking emancipation in the Church, such as the liberation theology movements of

Latin America, or black theology of the nineteenth century. Historically, the oppressed and marginalised have consistently sought ways to reread, reshape, and modernise the Christian doctrine to be inclusive and relevant, and these countercultural movements surely account for continuity and tradition in their own right. Based on this history, Daphne Hampson was prophetic in her assessment of the future of feminist theology, explaining that “Christianity is always adapting itself to something believable: it will do so again.”

A brief look at the ideologies and practices once condemned by the Catholic Church bears as her evidence: Judaism, Islam, freedom of conscience, democracy, heliocentricity, and Bible study for the laity are only some of such examples.

Building on the theology of the oppressed, contemporary feminist theologians are using their creative responses to promulgate their emancipatory agenda. For Linda Woodhead, the key to the future of feminist theology lies in generating interest; she criticises the current state of feminist theology as suffering from self-imposed isolation and segregation, separating itself from both mainstream theology and feminism, as well as from other academic disciplines. Woodhead is not ignorant of the plight of feminist theology and its marginalised position in what she calls the “malestream” theology, nor the shortage of external interest from different feminisms. At the same time, however, she urges religious women to change their tendency toward self-victimisation and their lack of constructive engagement with sixteen centuries of theologians, from St Augustine to Hildegarde to Catherine of Siena to Karl Barth. The primary way to do this is by facilitating engagement between feminism and theology. Though this may seem an obvious necessity for

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30 Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, 1.
31 Isherwood, 11.
33 Ibid, 198, 200-201.
34 Ibid, 199.
creating an effective discourse in “feminist theology,” the conversation between the two fields has been marginal, especially when examined in the direction of feminism to theology. As mentioned earlier, secularism in society has isolated religion from the “modern” consciousness, and thus marginalised feminist interest in theology, compared to feminist interest in history, sociology, or economics, among other disciplines. Subsequently, there has been recent recognition that “[drawing] on the ideas and arguments of ‘external’ advocates for change” is imperative for the internal reform of misogynistic religious traditions.35

This idea brings into focus the need for feminist theologians to branch out into different fields of academia.36 A number of contemporary scholars, such as Caroline Bynum and Mary McClintock Fulkerson, are spearheading this effort to reinterpret the relationship between women and the divine from inter- and cross-disciplinary standpoints. Fulkerson, for example, embeds feminist theology into her historiographical analysis of Christian thought and institutions in the West.37 The absence of female voices is actively criticised, while maintaining a sympathetic position to the significance of God in the lives of many women around the world.38 Fulkerson’s approach exemplifies the need to reassess the seemingly-impenetrable relationship between feminism, modernity, and secularism, which has resulted in the exclusion of religious women from society by promoting an image of the modern feminist as one who lives her personal and public life without the influence of God in any capacity. Bynum’s cross-disciplinary approach, on the other hand, subverts mainstream assumptions of gender normativity in Medieval religious thought by contrasting the generalised, androcentric scholarship on Church history and Christian sociology to the recorded experiences of women. Fulkerson and Bynum’s efforts have been commended in their fields for “bring[ing] what has been

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36 Woodhead, 202.
37 Mary M. Fulkerson, Changing the Subject: Woman’s Discourses and Feminist Theology (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1994).
38 Woodhead, 203.
hidden (the lives, voices and experiences of women) into plain sight... to draw attention to the contradictions performed within theology and church life... [and] the incoherence in texts that both affirm the full humanity of women and imply its opposite.”

Other scholars have tried, instead, to dismantle the widespread notion of the “inherent” patriarchy in Christianity. For example, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza asserts that the misogyny found in the Christian tradition is not innate, but rather a result of the assimilation of Christ's teachings into the language and male-dominant power structures of evangelised cultures. Some of Fiorenza’s arguments include a vision of the Kingdom of God as “the wholeness of everyone.” Similarly, Paula Cooey observes the “post-patriarchal” need to recognise the place of women in the religious life of the Church. Focusing instead on the Eucharist, Cooey asserts that the ritualistic regeneration of the body concerns both the male and female. The integration of women into the religious life of the Church as intended by Christ is further examined in Bynum’s study of Medieval gender, in which she applies the motherly characteristics of childbirth, lactation, and unconditional love for her children to the pre-modern understandings of Christ, and of popular saints such as Francis of Assisi. Aided in part by the sensationalism in her writing, such as her exploration of Catherine of Siena wearing the foreskin of Christ as a mystical and symbolic wedding ring, Bynum has garnered notable interest in the gendered notion of spirituality from a variety of disciplines outside Medieval history and theology. According to Sally Alsford, theorists such as Fiorenza, Ruether, and Bynum are all part

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39 Muers, 113.
43 Bynum, 35, 39.
of a movement which seeks to restore the female in the inherent Christian tradition,\textsuperscript{44} and to reinterpret the language and story of salvation as one which includes women.

As I have shown, today’s feminist theologians continue to build on the inherited tradition of late-Medieval and early-modern religious women by rereading and reinterpreting the Holy Scriptures. Contemporary feminist theologians seek to generate diverse interest and understanding by facilitating discussion between feminism, theology, and other disciplines, and by reconsidering the experience of religious women by feminising normative theology. One may ask: if modern society does indeed value secularism as a virtue, does the world need feminist theology? Ruth Page argues that it does, stating that “there is a real sense in which liberation theologies of all kinds—including feminist theology… as it is also one of liberation—who want real emancipation, will envisage a state of affairs where they are no longer needed as the voice of the oppressed group.”\textsuperscript{45} For Page, an ideal world is one in which there is no need for liberation movements, and perhaps this is true to some degree. However, even when articulated in a positive way, such opinions often come dangerously close to denying that there has ever existed subjugation and oppression, as they ignore those who have and will experience it.

Ultimately, feminist theology aims to liberate women by including them in the Christian tradition rather than allowing them to be oppressed by it. In doing so, feminist theology enables women to live a more Christian life and to create unity between feminism and theology. As Linda Hogan notes, “the notion that feminist theology having for its goal a liberative praxis is in no way problematic. Although it does shift the focus significantly, it in no ways disturbs the basic

methodological presuppositions of classical theology.” Serene Jones backs up this claim by defining feminist theology as one that “articulates the Christian message in language and actions that seek to liberate women and all persons, a goal that... cannot be disentangled from the central truths of the Christian faith.” These praxes are admittedly limited to the private sphere, but in a climate where mainstream feminist ideologies criticize the religious woman as being either archaic or oppressed by patriarchy, feminist theology is both liberates religious women from both the androcentric Christian tradition and also the neo-secular belief that modernity and secularism as coterminous. In doing so, feminist theologians have taken an increasingly criticised - and therefore privatised - element of the religious woman’s life, her religious beliefs, and brought it into conversation with modernity. Looking toward the future, feminist theologians are setting a precedent in both religious and secular spheres that undoubtedly has and will lead to great change.

Bibliography


46 Linda Hogan, From Women's Experience to Feminist Theology (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 95.

47 Muers, 112.


