

Gender and Meaning in a Postmodern World: An Elusive Quest for Truth

TINA BEATTIE*

I read the articles for this special edition of *Religion and Gender* at a time when the issues were foremost in my mind. I had just finished teaching a six week online course on 'Understanding Gender' for Catherine of Siena College,¹ and at the time of writing I was in Lund giving a lecture at the conference 'Tradition is the New Radical: Remapping Masculinities and Femininities in Theology'.²

The 'Understanding Gender' course has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my teaching career. Combining online learning with a discussion forum and a weekly live chat on Skype, it brought together twelve participants from India, Zimbabwe, Ireland and the UK, to share experiences and theological insights relating to gender, identity and faith. A session on Pope John Paul II's theology of complementarity left the students confused and frustrated, while Judith Butler's work generated considerable interest and engagement. Students introduced insights from Wagner's operas, James Joyce's novels, and John Donne's poetry. There were moving stories about sex workers and transgender people in India, and about the intolerance and violence shown towards gay and trans people in Iran. Some students shared their personal stories of coming out, and others discussed the pastoral challenges of encouraging traditional Christian congregations to think more deeply about issues of gender and to create opportunities for women's leadership. I had expected more conflict and disagreement within such a diverse group of students exploring what are often contested issues. What I found was openness and a hunger to learn, in a spirit of trust, respect and dialogue.

So it was timely for me to read the range of contributions from different contexts to this edition of *Religion and Gender*. I used Mary Anne Case's essay on 'The Role of the Popes in the Invention of Complementarity and the Vatican's Anathematization of Gender' as a set text for the 'Understanding Gender' course. In their different critical perspectives, the essays show how the Vatican's sustained opposition to what it calls 'gender ideology' is limiting its ability to be the kind of church that Pope Francis insists he wants – a messy, risk-taking,

¹ <https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/catherine-of-siena/>.

² <http://konferens.ht.lu.se/en/tradition-is-the-new-radical/>.

*Correspondence: University of Roehampton, London, UK.

E-mail: T.Beattie@roehampton.ac.uk.

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Religion and Gender | ISSN: 1878-5417 | www.religionandgender.org | Uopen Journals

pastorally engaged poor church of the poor, which puts real human needs and experiences before doctrinal absolutes. Sadly, in his repeated condemnations of gender ideology, Francis so far seems unable to break free of the mindset of his two predecessors on this issue, however much change he has made elsewhere in interpreting and applying church teaching. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*,³ Francis sets out conditions for fruitful dialogue which, while referring to dialogue in the context of marriage and family life, could serve as a guideline for any meaningful dialogue. I for one would welcome the day when he might apply these insights to engage in dialogue with theologians working in feminism and gender theory.

Such dialogue might also create much-needed synergy between Catholic social teaching and issues of gender, as we enter a challenging new era of political and social upheaval. So far, the rich insights of Catholic social teaching have been undermined by a failure to take an informed and enquiring approach to issues of gender and women's rights, particularly reproductive rights. For example, one will still search in vain for any reference to maternal mortality in Catholic social teaching documents, despite the close link between high levels of maternal mortality and poverty. On the other hand, gender theory can sometimes seem like a solipsistic assertion of individual rights, which takes little cognisance of the wider social and economic contexts within which such rights are asserted and claimed. Indeed, we might ask if some of the preoccupations of intellectual elites with issues of gender and sexuality have contributed to the widening abyss between cosmopolitan city dwellers and inhabitants of more homogenous communities whose cohesion is threatened by the rapid social, economic, and demographic changes of late modernity, often in ways which leave them economically deprived and politically marginalised. Such communities are vulnerable to being preyed upon and manipulated by the corporate elites who control so much of the media in Britain and America. The results of the Brexit referendum and the American election have woken us all up to something we should perhaps have seen coming.

We are in the very early stages of exploring what this political shift means as much for our questions about gender as for our questions about social and economic justice and international relations. The legally and socially compulsory heterosexuality of modernity is dissolving as more and more people find the courage to speak about their experiences of gendered fluidity, otherness and non-conformity. As many have argued, most notably Butler, heterosexual norms with their nuclear family support networks were the foundations of the modern capitalist system. As that system disintegrates, so too do its socio-sexual foundations.

Yet these are dangerous times, full of risk and volatility, and we must ask ourselves what we might rescue as well as what we might have to lose in the struggle to form viable political and social communities in the wake of the upheavals of 2016. The nuclear family has been deeply damaging to many people in different ways, but families are not always constricted by rigid social norms, and communities loosely woven around stable domestic environments are places of

³ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, 19 March 2016, Nos. 136-141, available at https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.

refuge, care, and love for the vulnerable. These are often relationships of dependence and care played out in the gravitational pull of heterosexual marriage – for example, with regard to the care of young children, sick or disabled family members, elderly parents, and spouses who become dependent through illness or old age – but there are also adoptive and communal connections that extend such domestic care beyond the white picket fence of the suburban Hollywood fantasy. The apparent normativity of the modern family with its heterosexual and patriarchal underpinnings is no longer sustainable, but it has been part of a social order in which fragile liberal experiments with democracy, equality and rights have found space to grow and to flourish, including, paradoxically, those experiments with gender, feminism and alternative ways of living and relating which undermine the very premises upon which the modern family itself has been established. Many parents have had to face up to their own repressed sexual and gendered selves, or to their children's non-conformity to their given gendered and sexual identities. Intergenerational relationships are the source of many of our recent explorations outside the normative boundaries of heterosexual family life. Liberalism has made possible such fragile discoveries and quests, but it has also strained our social bonds to breaking point. The struggle for individual liberties and the seductions of affluent consumerism have created cultures of complacency, which have lacked the political passion needed to resist the toxic effects of neo-liberalism.

If gender politics are indeed the substratum of the social order that is now giving way to the anarchic tyranny of the far right, then we face an awesome challenge. I encountered theologian Linn Marie Tonstad for the first time during the conference in Lund, and I was inspired by what seems like a fresh approach to issues of gender and theology – predicated upon the non-conflictual transcendence of God, the inevitable antagonisms of human relationships and how we deal with these, and the recognition of sin as a vital aspect of gendered theological reflection (Tonstad 2015). I have yet to engage closely with Tonstad's work, but she left me with a keen appetite to discover more – and it is a long time since I have felt such excitement with regard to engagement with contemporary theologians!

Tonstad dared to use that most unfashionable of words – 'truth'. I was surprised to hear that word used positively in the academic context in which we feminists and gender theologians tend to work, and then I wondered why I was so surprised. I found myself thinking (not for the first time) that it is not Donald Trump but postmodern theorists who ushered in the post-truth world. We are today counting the cost of that deliverance from the intellectual vocation to robust and contested truth-seeking into assertive and aggressive falsehood, by way of the postmodern denial of truth. I recall hearing Archbishop Dr. Antje Jackelén of Sweden speaking of ecumenical and interdisciplinary encounters, when she said that 'We are candidates for truth in a noble competition with each other'. That description struck a chord with me, and left me wondering how many of my postmodern secular contemporaries would agree with such a description of what we are about.

I am left asking if the task facing postmodern theologians of gender is that of playing a modest role in reweaving the social bonds that we may have unwittingly helped to destroy in our sometimes uncritical absorption into postmodernity's language games. In particular, I think we need to pose a robust challenge to theoretical perspectives that exclude the bodily performances and exchanges

of religiously constituted lives, which still make up the vast majority of lives in our global communities and cultures. How we do this – how we listen, how we learn, how we live – will be the crucial challenge each of us faces in the coming years. An inescapable aspect of this task is that of remembering – how and what we remember, and why we need to remember. A living religious tradition is a form of remembering the past in order to shape the future, and the task of religious scholars and theologians is surely that of intellectually rigorous but also creative and reflective remembering, of recalling ancient and living traditions and breaking them open again and again to future possibilities. That is a task of hope as well as of memory.

While in Lund, I met Swedish writer Göran Rosenberg, and I am now reading his spellbinding and heartbreaking memoir, *A Brief Stop on the Road from Auschwitz*. Rosenberg writes:

A blatant lie loosens the ground beneath what can't be forgotten and turns it into a quagmire. In its defense against such a weapon, therefore, memory must time and time again mobilize its collected arsenal of witnesses, documents and relics to fortify, time and again, the loosening ground beneath it. (Rosenberg 2014: 113)

In this time of blatant lies, we are called to recollect the broken fragments of ourselves and others, of our politics and histories, of our stories and visions, and to weave them into new narratives of hope. Our task is, as Adrienne Rich (1981: 22) reminds us, that freedom which comes with 'daily, prose-bound, routine remembering. Putting together, inch by inch the starry worlds. From all the lost collections.'

In a conversation with Rosenberg and Tonstad, we were discussing the difference between frailty and vulnerability. Frailty is an acceptance of finitude, death, and limitation, but vulnerability suggests threat and fear. That conversation has given me food for thought. We are frail and finite in our endeavours but, though a spider's web is easily broken, the silk out of which it is woven is one of the strongest materials known in nature. So as the web of the present order is torn apart, we must trust that the silk woven into each human life is stronger than the strongest powers of destruction, for it is the silken strand of our divinised selves within but also beyond all gendered and finite knowing. Perhaps a dialogue between religion and gender beyond ideology can help us to discern that silken thread and to weave it into new patterns of meaning and politics capable of sustaining emergent life in all its frailty and wonder.

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