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Volume 5 | Issue 1

Article 1

2015

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ISSN: 1839-0366

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Recommended Citation

Rowland, Tracey A. (2015) "Feminism from the Perspective of Catholicism," *Solidarity: The Journal of Catholic Social Thought and Secular Ethics*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 1.
Available at: <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/solidarity/vol5/iss1/1>

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Feminism from the Perspective of Catholicism

Abstract

This paper on feminism was given at a public lecture in Spain.

The author speaks from the perspective of contemporary Catholicism, represented in the magisterial teachings of St John Paul II, foreshadowed in the works of St. Edith Stein, and amplified and developed by contemporary Catholic scholars such as Prudence Allen, Michelle Schumacher, Leonie Caldecott and Cardinals Angelo Scola, Walter Kasper and Karl Lehmann.

Feminism from the Perspective of Catholicism¹

Tracey Rowland

This paper begins with a brief exploration of the differences between the presuppositions of contemporary versions of Feminism by comparison with those of Catholicism in relation to foundational understandings of the nature of human life and the meaning of human existence. It goes on to explore current Catholic scholarship on the vocation of women, relationality between men and women and the nature of human freedom and dignity with reference to Feminist approaches. The final section of the paper argues for a surprising or unanticipated convergence between Radical Feminism and some contemporary Catholic scholarship on the significance and value of female sexuality and the socio-political, economic and technological challenges presented by particular contemporary practices. The commodification of human beings and human sexuality, the exploitation of human reproduction and the trivialisation of sexual difference are approached in the context of the problems they create not only for women, but for what St John Paul II refers to as ‘the spiritual problematic of all persons’.

In approaching a discussion of feminism, one must recognise that feminism, like Christianity, is a social movement with an intellectual tradition, which like all intellectual traditions it comes with its own canons of authority and its own disputed issues. These areas of dispute in turn give rise to different schools of Feminist thought, in much the same way that the disputed theological questions of the 16th century gave rise to various different denominations of Protestantism.

It is not possible in the space of a short paper to give comprehensive attention to each distinct branch of Feminist thought, for example, Liberal, Marxist, Essentialist, Radical and Deconstructivist, since each comes with its own distinct emphases, epistemologies, political priorities and points of entry in the history of the movement. This paper will however endeavour to show the relevance of its argument to a specific sub-species of Feminism when the point being made is not in relation to Feminism in general, but merely to a particular branch. It is likewise impossible to write from the perspective of Christianity in general, since Christianity is itself similarly divided into many factions. Consequently, this paper is written from the perspective of contemporary Catholicism, represented in the magisterial teachings of St John Paul II, foreshadowed in the works of St Edith Stein, and amplified and developed by contemporary Catholic scholars such as Prudence Allen, Michelle Schumacher, Leonie Caldecott and Cardinals Angelo Scola, Walter Kasper and Karl Lehmann.

What seems the starkest difference between Catholicism and contemporary Feminism is Catholicism’s commitment to three beliefs: the first, that the world was created by a Tri-personal God in a state of harmony; the second, that this original innocence and harmony was destroyed by a misuse of human free-will, with the effect that discord was introduced into the relationship between men and women; and the third, that the Incarnation of the Second Person of this Trinitarian God brought about the possibility of human redemption from the effects of the original catastrophe, by the gift of grace. The three key theoretical presuppositions are

¹ The author wishes to acknowledge the valuable research assistance of Anna Krohn, the Convenor of Anima Catholic Women’s Network (based in Melbourne, Victoria), in the preparation of this paper, which was originally delivered as a speech at El Escorial, Spain, in June, 2014.

therefore: (i) creation as a gift, (ii) the human rejection of the gift as it was given and the consequential intervention of sin, and thus, (iii) the need of grace and redemption.

In this paper, different versions of feminism are taken as tending to share the property of being post-Christian or post-Catholic in the sense that they do not begin their analysis of what it means to be a woman, with the ideas of creation, of sin and of redemption through the grace of the Incarnation. Rather, they begin from different post-Christian anthropological foundations. It is for this reason that Cardinal Lehmann has observed that the issue of the relationship between feminism and Christianity is ‘a question of humanness as such’.² Lehmann argues that the ‘recent women’s movement has brought to light the fact that the decisive answers to our problem are directly or indirectly predetermined by global views of the meaning of human life and the order of human existence as such...the battle over the place of women in the Church and in society is in essence a fight concerning anthropology’.³

Therefore this discussion begins by offering an exposition of what is current Catholic teaching on anthropology, to be found in St John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* on the Dignity and Vocation of Women.⁴ St John Paul II begins his analysis with the story of creation in the book of *Genesis*. He asserts that ‘the biblical text provides sufficient bases for recognising the essential equality of men and woman from the point of view of their humanity...The woman is another I in a common humanity’. Henceforth they are called not only to exist ‘side by side’ but to “exist mutually one for the other”. Referring to the passage in *Genesis* 2:18-35 regarding a woman being a “helpmate” of the man, the pope wrote: ‘it is a help on the part of both, it is a mutual help in interpersonal communion’⁵ that integrates what is masculine with what is feminine. He then went on to draw an analogy between the interpersonal communion of men and women and the communion of Persons within the Trinity. This analogy is especially strong when describing a spousal relationship but more generally the pope argues that all human beings, married or single, are created to make of themselves a gift to other human persons and it is through making a gift of oneself to others that individuals achieve self-realisation. This theology is simply an echo of statements to be found in paragraphs 22-25 of the Conciliar document *Gaudium et spes*, which the young Karol Wojtyla helped to draft.⁶

The idea that male and female were created as equals is now standard Catholic teaching and is at quite a distance from many Protestant interpretations of the same scriptural passages, especially in those communities which had their origins in the Mennonite movement and which remain influential in American Protestantism today (most notably in the Amish communities). Consistent with John Paul’s reading, in an article published in *Theology Today* in 1997, William E. Phipps argued that the Hebrew word for helpmate ‘ezer neged’ is used around 20 times in the Bible and does not in other contexts carry connotations of an apprentice or servant;

² Karl Lehmann, “The Place of Women as a Problem in Theological Anthropology” In *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, eds. Hans Urs von Balthasar, et.al, trans: Maria Shradly and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 13.

³ Lehmann, “The Place of Women as a Problem in Theological Anthropology”, 13.

⁴ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Apostolic Letter, Vatican Website, August 15, 1988
http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, III, sec. 7:3.

⁶ Second Vatican Council, “*Gaudium et spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” Vatican Website, December 7, 1965.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

in fact in some cases it refers to a superior person and to someone offering divine assistance. Phipps suggests that the best translation would be something like a ‘partner corresponding to him’, that is, a partner corresponding to Adam.⁷

In contemporary Catholic marriages among the educated classes in the Anglophone world it is, arguably, this understanding of ‘helpmate’ that prevails. Couples think of each other as being in a relationship of mutual self-giving love and service with each party bringing to the marriage his and her own menu of gifts. While couples joke about their being “blue” jobs and “pink” jobs, with the blue jobs tending to be those requiring physical strength and the pink jobs being those that require a very high level of emotional intelligence, in general most Catholic couples operate on a principle of each playing to their own strengths rather than having strict fields of responsibility determined by their sex. An intelligent male knows if his wife is better at something than he is, and defers to her superior knowledge and talent in those areas and conversely an intelligent woman defers to her husband in areas she judges to be his strength, not hers.

Outside of the educated classes of the first world, however, and especially in Latin America, machismo remains a social problem for women. The idea that women are somehow inferior to men continues to prevail in some Catholic sub-cultures, notwithstanding the official magisterial teaching. The caveman attitude with its focus on what a woman can do to satisfy various carnal desires of the male and the corresponding view that a woman exists to do nothing more than satisfy such desires, *does persist*; and its persistence is a problem which highlights a significant difference between many feminist ideas and those of John Paul II. The difference lies in the fact that John Paul II, unlike most feminists, has not abandoned the concept of sin. He acknowledges that men can desire to dominate and even to exploit women and he reads this as sinful and a result of what in theological parlance is called ‘original sin’. He interprets *Genesis 3:16*, the statement that ‘a woman’s desire shall be for her husband, and he shall rule over her’, as a description of fallen humanity. He writes: ‘this domination indicates the disturbance and loss of that stability of the fundamental equality which the man and the woman possess in the unity of the two and this is especially to the disadvantage of the woman, though it also diminishes the true dignity of the man’.⁸ Contrary to this fallen condition of humanity, marriage requires respect for and the perfection of the personal subjectivity of both the man and the woman. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, St John Paul II emphatically asserted that ‘the woman cannot become the object of domination and male possession’.⁹

A difficulty of course, for the post-Enlightenment mind, that has rejected such concepts as original sin and its remedy, grace, and the whole sacramental economy, is how does one account for the persistence of the problems in male-female relationships? If there is no original sin, no concupiscence, what is the cause of the problem? And further, what remedies does one have apart from political campaigns, consciousness raising programmes and female separatism, which reaches its most extreme form in lesbian separatism? In short, the difference between a typical feminist and John Paul II, is that feminists are likely to see the solution to perennial problems in various forms of state supported social engineering, whereas for John Paul II, the key solutions are a personal relationship with the Trinity, an openness to the work of grace, and the humility to constantly seek forgiveness and examine one’s conscience. Thus social action manifests via a significant and deeply personal encounter with God.

⁷ William E. Phipps, “Adam’s Rib: Bone of Contention”, *Theology Today* 33, No. 3 (1997): 271.

⁸ *Gaudium et spes*, III, sec. 6:5.

⁹ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, IV, sec.10:2

Leonie Caldecott, an English Catholic author, has summarised much of the above with the statement that '[a]ccording to Wojtyla's interpretation of *Genesis* 2:18-20 which refers to the creation of Eve as Adam's helpmate, this helpmate status refers to an ontological assistance, a kind of complementarity, not to a form of servitude', and further, '[t]he loving unity to which men and women are called will be achieved not by suppressing all distinctions, but by ending the "quarrel" between the *bad masculine* and the *bad feminine* that has developed in the state of sin'.¹⁰

There is also a significant difference between a Christian understanding of freedom and post-Enlightenment, in particular, liberal understandings of freedom. Christian conceptions of freedom link the exercise of freedom to the pursuit of truth and goodness and beauty understood as transcendental properties of being, whereas post-Enlightenment philosophers tend to see freedom as simply a condition of having unlimited choices. Archbishop Javier Martinez has explained the intellectual genealogy of this difference between the Christian conception of freedom and post-Christian conceptions in the chapter referred to below, 'Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith'. He begins by noting that since creation comes from God, is directed towards God and stands in relation to God, Christians believe that creation is revelatory of God. This idea, described in theological parlance as the analogy of being, was rejected by Duns Scotus, who preferred the idea of the univocity of being. As a consequence of this shift, God became separated from the world and reduced to a being among other beings, whose specific difference was explained in terms of qualities such as absolute freedom and absolute power. Martinez writes:

[The effect of the abandonment of the analogy of the being] was that reason and freedom do not happen in a context. Like the ego, they have no body, no father and mother and are 'suspended' in the air. They do not have any roots or purposes given to them from anywhere, and therefore they do not need and cannot be educated in any proper sense of the word. They do not have the possibility of self-delusion. They can only be mistaken when some relevant piece of data is lacking or when they are not sufficiently enlightened. Otherwise they are always right.

At the same time, as a direct consequence of the 'separation' of God from the world, the world (anything besides the ego, beginning with one's body) has become nature. This 'nature' is seen at the beginning as almost divine, but soon it will be reduced to an artefact and finally a commodity for human consumption. It has no secrets but it can be measured and the quality of being measurable becomes synonymous with being intelligible and over time mathematics comes to be considered the standard for all types of knowledge. This transparent world, is also, however, a closed world. Nature as a commodity is such a closed world that it cannot offer any surprises and it cannot be a sign of anything.¹¹

As a consequence, the whole category of sacrament is abandoned, the divinely appointed means of conferring grace on human beings is lost and freedom becomes simply the ability to do with this commodity whatever one wishes. Martinez concludes that the secular tradition (of which, feminism is an outgrowth) is 'so deeply marked by its opposition to Christianity that it retains most of the categories of the tradition to which it opposes itself (although in a negative

¹⁰ Léonie Caldecott, "Sincere Gift: The Pope's New Feminism", *Communio: International Review*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1996): 64-81.

¹¹ Javier Martinez, "Christ of History, Jesus of Faith" in *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth*, ed. Adrian Pabst and Angus Paddison (London, SCM Press, 2009), 27.

or inverted fashion)’; and ‘it hides and masks its dogmatic character through a rhetoric that pretends to recover the real world once the obstacle of Christianity has been put aside (or at least bracketed)’.¹² Accordingly:

It is a tradition marked by this paradox: in the same measure as it achieves its aims, it destroys its very ideals which are still to a great degree Christian ideals, cut off from their roots in the soil of the Christian tradition where they were embedded. A notion like freedom as a faculty belonging to every human being qua human being, which is so indigenous to the Christian tradition and so essential to the constructions of the Enlightenment, has been defined by the secular post-Enlightenment tradition mostly in negative terms, as a ‘freedom’ from the tutelage of Christian discipline and dogma and also as a ‘freedom’ from any other bond.¹³

Martinez observes that once people are offered that sort of freedom, nobody knows what to do with it, until the next dictator or marketing guru comes and tells them.

As a consequence, contemporary social theorists now speak of the aestheticisation of reality, the cutting loose of representations from what they represent. For example, in her best-selling book, *No Logo*, Naomi Klein argued that brand-name multinational corporations have switched from the manufacturing of commodities towards the branding or marketing of images.¹⁴ Branding is about ideas, attitudes, lifestyle and values all embodied in the logo. Klein argues that branding becomes a major culture creating force, a way that individuals exercise their freedom where freedom is understood as the freedom of consumer choice and identities are attached not to any transcendental properties such as truth, beauty and goodness but to preferences for one designer label over another.

The Catholic theologian Michelle Schumacher concurs with this reading of the intellectual history and she argues that the problem of much contemporary feminist thinking from a Christian point of view is that it seeks solutions to the tension between male and female relations from within the framework of the early-modern separation of God from creation and then nature from grace.

What Schumacher calls ‘the feminist quandary’ oscillates between a view of femininity as essentialist, which runs the risk of fostering the idea that biology is destiny, as Simone de Beauvoir expressed the principle; and a view of femininity as culturally constructed, which runs the risk of devaluing feminine difference. The way out of this quandary ‘is to insist upon neither the social construction of nature that would refuse essential differences between men and women, nor an essentialist view of nature when interpreted as the de facto isolation of women from the larger male-dominated polis’.¹⁵ Rather, Schumacher suggests that what is required is an affirmation of sexual difference within a relational model of human nature. By a relational model of human nature she means that the human being - male or female – far from existing in a state where his or her personal good is opposed to the common good, actually achieves his or her personal good through participation in and contribution to the common

¹² Martinez, “Christ of History, Jesus of Faith”, 29.

¹³ Martinez, “Christ of History, Jesus of Faith”, 29-30.

¹⁴ Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (London: Flamingo, 2001).

¹⁵ Michele Schumacher, “The Nature of Nature in Feminism Old and New: From Dualism to Complementary Unity” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism* ed. Michele M Schumacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 19-20.

good. This is really a philosophical echo of the more explicitly theological anthropology of John Paul II.

Schumacher concludes that:

[f]ar from being at odds with the transcendental character of the human person – with his or her self-determination and the ongoing “project” of self-development and self-fulfilment which are integral to human existence as such – the return to the classically Christian presentation of nature (whether of the Greek or Latin tendency) would actually preserve this dimension within the larger context of personal self-fulfilment and thus of vocation, where vocation is itself understood in terms of and as a response to love.¹⁶

In this vision, self-fulfilment is as much a communal effort as a personal one. Rather than there being a dualistic relationship between nature and culture, giving rise to the unhappy choice between femininity as biological determinism and femininity as a mere social construct, there is a symbiotic relationship. Nature both requires culture and contributes to culture and the concepts of vocation and self-realisation are understood as a response to love. As the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre explains the anthropological principle, human beings are dependent rational animals,¹⁷ or, to put the matter in the idiom of John Paul II, relationality is an essential component of human nature.

However when freedom is disconnected from both nature and grace, one person’s freedom is not organically connected to that of another. In such a world there is no room for the idea of one person’s good being recognised as existing in that of another, or even of being fulfilled through the gift of the self to another. In such a culture, love becomes suspect and cultural practices take the form of the survival of the fittest. Human relationships become defined by mutual utility rather than mutual love. John Paul II called such cultures a culture of death, and juxtaposed them to what he called a civilisation of love.

Cardinal Walter Kasper points to the affirmation of the intrinsic goodness of male and female sexuality within such a framework. He observes that the doctrine of creation justifies neither a materialistic or idealistic view of human beings. Rather:

Christian anthropology sees the human body as a real symbol, as the ‘excarnation’ of the human spirit, the spirit being the form and life principle of the body’. With this view Christianity by its very nature – unfortunately not always in its concrete historical realisation – is incompatible with every form of Gnosticism, which in its hostility to the body and sexuality regards the real human being, the self, as an inner personal core indifferent to the body and sexuality. If the body is the real symbol of the human spirit, then bodily, sexually specific differences cannot be irrelevant to the constitution of the person. So, we cannot say that there is just a minor biological difference between man and woman with admittedly great sociological

¹⁶ Schumacher, “The Nature of Nature in Feminism Old and New: From Dualism to Complementary Unity”, 20.

¹⁷ See Alisdair C. MacIntyre. *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (The Paul Carus Lectures: Carus Publishing Company, 1999).

consequences; the sexual is not a specialised zone or sector but a determination of the human being which affects the whole person, all that is human.¹⁸

Kasper concludes that ‘the devaluation of the sexual expresses itself not only in a falsely understood asceticism (typical of puritanical forms of Christianity), but also in a libertinism, which regards sexuality as ultimately trivial and inconsequential for the person, and not least in the attempt to emancipate human beings from their natural preconditions’.¹⁹ He also noted that insights from modern biology, which show that there are quite significant differences in the bodily constitution of men and women, are often down-played for ideological reasons. In full accord with Schumacher, Kasper asserts that ‘culture does not mean an emancipation from nature but the creative realisation of its possibilities’.²⁰

At this micro level of what to make of sexual difference itself, the Catholic philosopher, Prudence Allen, who was appointed to the International Theological Commission in 2014 by Pope Francis, suggests that almost all the commentators from classical times through the medieval period up to the present day tend to fall into one of four categories.²¹ She identifies these categories as sex unity, sex polarity, sex complementarity and reverse polarity. The sex unity position devalues the bodily differences between men and women and Plato is its exemplary theoretician in *The Republic*. For sex polarity theorists bodily differences are significant and men are in some sense superior to women. Here Allen offers Aristotle and Aquinas as her exemplary proponents. Reverse polarity proponents acknowledge differences and posit the superiority of the feminine, as one can find in New Age feminism focused on encountering the so-called goddess within.²² Then there is sex complementarity, a position that treats sexual difference as significant but acknowledges an equality of the sexes. Prudence Allen offers the Abbess Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), who was declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XVI, as an example of an early Catholic proponent of sex complementarity. Allen suggests that Hildegard believed in a kind of fractional complementarity where there is no strong overlap between the characteristics of each of the sexes. Allen however prefers to promote the concept of integral complementarity – the idea that men and women must be understood as whole and not as fractional beings. In integral sex complementarity, bodily features play a role, but not the *only role* in determining one’s identity and vocation.

Contemporary Catholic theology wishes to affirm both equality and differentiation and most contemporary theorists would be classified as proponents of an integral complementarity, though there are some feminist nuns who have been influenced by the New Age movement who promote a new kind of reverse polarity.²³

¹⁸ Walter Kasper, “The Position of Women as a Problem of Theological Anthropology” in *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, eds Hans Urs von Balthasar, et. al, trans: Maria Shradly and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 58.

¹⁹ Kasper, “The Position of Women as a Problem of Theological Anthropology”, 59.

²⁰ Kasper, “The Position of Women as a Problem of Theological Anthropology”, 60.

²¹ Prudence Allen, “Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion”, *Communio International Catholic Review*, (Winter, 1990): 523-44.

²² For example: Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddesses in Everywoman: Thirtieth Anniversary Edition: Powerful Archetypes in Women’s Lives* (New York, N.Y: Harper Collins, 2014).; Jennifer Barker Woolger and Roger, J. Woolger. *Goddess Within: A Guide to the Eternal Myths*. (New York, N.Y.: Ballantine Books, 1989).

²³ Laurie Brink, *A marginal life: Pursuing holiness in the 21st century* (conference paper: Leadership Conference of Women Religious Keynote Address. Kansas City, MO, August 2, 2007),

Allen writes that if we think of sex identity in terms of isolating certain characteristics so that a male provides one half and a female one half of a whole human being, or even if we imagine an odd fraction like one third and two thirds, then the so called complementarity between the man and woman is fractional.²⁴ Such a fractional complementarity can leave women feeling as though they occupy the less significant fraction. By comparison, Allen suggests that the merit of integral complementarity is that it considers both men and women to be already whole persons, and metaphorically speaking, more like integers than fractions.

Consistent with Schumacher and John Paul II, Allen argues that the key factor in Christian existential personalism is the idea that the person actively creates his or her identity in a 'gift of self' to another. This goes beyond the individual who defines the self away from and in opposition to others. Allen concludes that the activity of individual self-definition is dynamic and vital, as well as being sexually differentiated, so that it has some different parameters for man than it does for a woman.

Both Allen and John Paul II were influenced by the work of the German Jewish philosopher Edith Stein who converted to Catholicism after reading St. Teresa of Avilas *Interior Castle*. Stein had been a student of Edmund Husserl and she collaborated with Heidegger on the publication of some of Husserl's papers. She eventually entered the Discalced Carmelites and perished in Auschwitz in 1942 having been one of several converts who were rounded up by the Gestapo in Holland in retaliation for an anti-Nazi statement issued by the Dutch hierarchy. Stein was canonised by John Paul II in 1998 and declared to be one of the six patron saints of Europe along with St. Benedict, Sts. Cyril and Methodius, St. Bridget of Sweden and St. Catherine of Siena. Many of the ideas of John Paul II expressed in his *Letter to Women* and in his Apostolic Exhortation on the *Dignity and Vocation of Women (Mulieris Dignitatem)*²⁵ can be found in the publications of Edith Stein.²⁶

Sarah Borden, a recent author on the philosophy of Stein, writes:

[For Stein] no woman is only a woman. Each woman, just as each man, has her own individual talents and capacities, be they artistic, scientific, technical, intellectual, or otherwise. No one has merely, or purely, a feminine or masculine nature... Rather, each of us is human and within human nature there is a division between the feminine and the masculine... In general, more females have feminine traits and they tend toward the feminine, while males tend toward the masculine, but all may realise the feminine or masculine nature to differing degrees and in differing ways.²⁷

In her *Essays on Woman*, Stein points to two distinctive characteristics of the feminine. First, women have an orientation towards the personal, men towards the objective, and secondly, she claims that women are directed towards the whole, whereas men tend to

https://lcrw.org/sites/default/files/calendar/attachments/2007_Keynote_Address-Laurie_Brink-OP.pdf; and Sandra. M. Schneider, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2004).

²⁴ Allen, "Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion"

²⁵ Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women. Section 10, paragraph 2.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html. Retrieved 21st December, 2015; regarding *Mulieris Dignitatem* (see footnote 3 above).

²⁶ Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*. 2nd rev. ed., trans. Washington Province of Discalced Carmelites, Inc. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987).

²⁷ Sarah Borden, *Edith Stein* (London: Continuum, 2003), 70.

compartmentalise. In claiming that women are more personally oriented, Stein is not making the claim that women are not capable of abstract thought. She herself was a philosopher immersed in abstract thought, but she believed that women are characteristically not content to remain on the level of the abstract but want to ground the abstract in the concrete.

Stein also argued that men and women have different tendencies as a result of fallen human behaviour. Women may have a ‘perverse desire to intrude into personal lives’ rather than waiting to be invited into the interior life of another person, and thus they are susceptible to wasting their time on gossip. Or they may have a desire to lose themselves completely in another person, a tendency that has been recognised in popular psychology texts as the problem of women who love too much.²⁸ Or the feminine desire for wholeness may result in scatty and unreliable behaviour when a woman becomes occupied on so many fronts as to be ineffective in any of them.

Borden summarises Stein’s assessment of the effect of the fall on men with the following list of masculine temptations:

Fallen masculine nature, [in contrast to fallen feminine nature] leads to ‘brutal despotism over creatures, especially over women’, and a tendency to allow his work to dominate him to the point of the atrophy of his own development, [while] the degeneration of the feminine nature goes in an opposite direction, including a ‘servile dependence on man’ and a superficiality that is primarily sensual. The masculine nature, when it is not appropriately developed, tends toward aggression, and the feminine toward a pathetic passivity. The fallen masculine nature results in a kind of tunnel vision, one-sidedly focusing on his work, whereas the fallen feminine nature lacks the depth to correct this, limiting itself merely to the superficial and thereby losing its spiritual equilibrium in a sensuous life.²⁹

With reference to the masculine tendency to give priority to the objective over the personal, some contemporary Catholic scholars have observed that a problem with the 18th century is not so much that it emphasised rationality, but that the typical 18th century account of rationality was narrowly focused on one dimension of the intellect’s capacity.

In his *Leisure as the Basis of Culture*, Josef Pieper, another twentieth century German Catholic philosopher, put the problem like this:

The medievals distinguished between the intellect as *ratio* and the intellect as *intellectus*. *Ratio* is the power of discursive thought, or searching and re-searching, abstracting, refining and concluding whereas *intellectus* refers to the ability of “simply looking” (*simplex intuitus*), to which the truth presents itself as a landscape presents itself to the eye. The spiritual knowing power of the human mind, as the ancients understood it, is really two things in one: *ratio* and *intellectus*: all knowing involved both. The path of discursive reasoning is accompanied and penetrated by the *intellectus*’ untiring vision, which is not active but passive, or better, receptive – a receptively operating power of the intellect.³⁰

²⁸ For example, Robin Norwood. *Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He’ll Change*. (New York, N.Y.: Pocket Books, 2008).

²⁹ Norwood, *Women Who Love Too Much: When You Keep Wishing and Hoping He’ll Change*, 74.

³⁰ Josef Pieper, *Leisure as the Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2009), 10.

The problem with much contemporary philosophy is that it denigrates the role of *intellectus* or completely ignores it. An interesting and underdeveloped element of Stein's account of integral complementarity is that she seems to be suggesting that while men have a tendency to emphasise the dimension of *ratio*, women have a kind of in-built aptitude for the work of *intellectus*, which is not to say that men and women cannot operate on both levels, merely that it might be the case that men have a stronger aptitude for one and women for the other. What Stein identified as the typically feminine interest in the personal and corresponding high emotional intelligence was labelled by John Paul II as "the feminine genius".³¹

Thus, to summarise this section of the paper it may be argued that from a contemporary Catholic point of view, the problem with much secular feminist theory is that it struggles to find an adequate anthropology which can offer any hope to women who are trying to transcend the dualisms of biological determinism and the cultural relativising of the significance of sexual difference.

There is quite a high level of agreement between leading contemporary Catholic scholars and feminist scholars about the ontological equality of the sexes, but what the Catholic scholars have in their intellectual tool-box which most secular feminist theorists do not, is a narrative about how the conflict between the sexes arose and how the conflict might be overcome through the grace of the Incarnation. The Catholic anthropology is rooted in Trinitarian theology with the relationships between the persons of the Trinity offering a model of an equality of persons within difference. The Persons of the Trinity are equal as divine, and yet each one is different in relation to the other. Each person of the Trinity has free will, intelligence and differentiated identity, for we speak of the Father as the Creator, the Son as the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit as the Advocate. The members of the Trinity can therefore be said to exist within a relation of integral complementarity. It is partly for this reason that Cardinal Angelo Scola has argued that a culture that does not accept the revelation of the Trinitarian God ultimately renders itself incapable of understanding sexual difference in a positive sense.³²

There is also an interesting convergence developing between Catholic theorists and Radical Feminists who are approaching many contemporary so-called women's issues from a perspective critical of the power of the market and of the commodification of human beings and utilitarian modes of relating. The term "radical" is used by these feminists because they believe in an ontological solidity, a radical value of the human body, especially of a woman's body. They seem to believe that there is something "essential" in the sense of a biological given about a male body and female body, however this comes about. They believe that being "given" a woman's body is neither the curse of maleficent nature nor something that is to be overcome (as it were) by technology or by idealised theories of gender identity.

It is true that many of these radical feminists are suspicious of heterosexual bodily exchanges which they fear (in the way we might think of original sin) is "inherently violent"—but it is not the case that all radical feminists are committed to lesbian relationships or that they hate men understood in a Marxist-related sense of the "class" called male. They tend to be suspicious of any feminism too closely evolved from "male" philosophy—so they do not call

³¹ Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women. sec. 10:2.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

³² Angelo Scola, "The Dignity and Mission of Women: The Anthropological and Theological Foundations," *Communio International Catholic Review* (Spring, 1998): 42-56 at 52.

themselves Marxist feminists or liberal feminists. Self-declared Radical Feminists include: Gale Dines, Andrea Dworkin, Renate Klein, Susan Hawthorne, Megan Tyler and Catharine McKinnon. In some places they might associate with green movements, they tend to favour social activism and counter cultural critique and they are also critical of elements of post-modern feminism.

In their very helpful analysis of the movement of Australian radical feminism – the editors of *Radically Speaking: Feminism Re-claimed* wrote: ‘[o]ur ability to act in the present is being severely curtailed by the post-modern insistence that there are no subjects, with the consequence that woman has been virtually erased as the author of her own life’.³³ Like the British based Radically Orthodox circle of theologians, which includes a number of Catholics, the Radical Feminists believe that the “personal” and the “political” are interconnected. It might be argued that there is a strong convergence between the Radical Feminists and contemporary Catholic scholars on at least nine points or ideas, which can be articulated under the banners of political ideology, political economy and their effects on moral and cultural priorities.

First, in relation to questions of political ideology, the Radical Feminists reject the liberal notion of ‘choice’ and any ideology that proposes a neutral polis. At the same time, they reject the commodification of sexuality in any form, and in particular they actively oppose pornography and the sexualisation of pre-pubescent girls carried out by marketing agencies and fashion design industry leaders. Rejection of the accommodation of violence within sexuality is the third point of convergence between contemporary Catholic scholars and Radical Feminists, who acknowledge the links between the acceptance of violent sexual relationships and pornography.

In relation to questions of political economy and the potential for the exploitative use of technology, the fourth idea to which Radical Feminists are committed is the rejection of the practices of in-vitro fertilisation (IVF), surrogacy and other commercialized forms of reproductive technology. In taking this stance Radical Feminists tend to be in complete concordance with statements in *Donum Vitae* (a 1987 statement of the Doctrine of the Congregation of the Faith)³⁴ about the power imbalance inherent in the work of scientists who boast about creating human embryos. Radical Feminists internationally have issued warnings alerting the public in general, and in particular those considering the use of such technologies, to the question of which people or organizations benefit from the use of these technologies and by contrast, which pay the price of their use. FINNRAGe (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering) has exposed both “benevolent” in-vitro fertilisation and the dangers of its use of fertility drugs; as well as the associated emotional and economic exploitation of women ensuing from these practices. Pointing to the high failure rates of in-vitro fertilisation (which can be up to 90-95% or greater depending upon the number

³³ Diane Bell and Renate Klein, *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed* (Melbourne; Spinifex Press, 1996), xvii.

³⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation Replies to Certain Questions of the Day*, Vatican Website, February 22, 1987, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html.

of cycles involved and the age of the woman),³⁵ feminists have also challenged the hegemony of ‘technodocs’ and pharmaceutical companies.

Importantly, the feminist critique highlights the socio-political dangers inherent in development of reproductive technology and the beliefs, attitudes and values associated with such developments. These dangers include the potential for creating a society composed of children made to order, the eradication of genetic diversity, and the imposition of a “norm” which is uncomfortably Eurocentric white and male. Scientists and doctors have fiercely rebuked what they take to be feminist prophecies of doom, attempting to discount their logic by calling them hysterical, excessive and disproportionate.

However, the critiques that Radical Feminists offer in relation to developments in the area of women’s reproductive health extend beyond their concerns about reproductive technologies. Hence the fifth point of convergence between contemporary Catholic scholars and Radical Feminists concerns their growing suspicion of developments in contraceptive technology. Radical Feminists challenge big pharmaceutical companies and the purported advancement achieved by their contraceptive products, which include abortifacients such as the so-called morning after pill - RU 486. Similarly and as a sixth point of convergence, they are ambivalent about and increasingly opposed to large, corporatized and male-run abortion clinics and are prepared to acknowledge the reality and the impact of post-abortion trauma and grief on women. The seventh point of convergence is the particular exception Radical Feminists take to state-run contraceptive practices and population control policies, which they identify as being imbued with the implicit, unexamined presuppositions of racial and eugenic ideology. In the words of Germaine Greer, ‘[t]hese are the suppositions which underlie our eagerness to extend the use of modern contraceptives into every society on earth, regardless of its own set of cultural and moral priorities’. She went so far as to assert that ‘another name for this type of moral chaos is evil’.³⁶

Janice Raymond in her book *Women as Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and the Battle over Women’s Freedom* addresses contraceptive practices in the Third World that might similarly lead us to question the suppositions underlying those practices:

The reproductive use and abuse of women is also played out on the international stage of population policy and programs. In contrast to the technologies and drugs promoting fertility, which are now common in so called First World, Third World women received drugs and technologies designed to promote infertility. Repeated sterilization and the exporting of dangerous contraceptives are the consequences of technological reproduction for women in the Third World. ... Medical science and technology are promoting infertility in the Third World while denouncing it in the First World... the Third World is in the past and present the dumping ground for chemicals and drugs banned in the West- DDT and DES for example. Now these

³⁵ Alan Macalldowie, Yueping A. Wang, Abrar A. Chughtai and Georgina M. Chambers. *Assisted reproductive technology in Australia and New Zealand 2012*. (Sydney: National Perinatal Epidemiology and Statistics Unit, the University of New South Wales, November 2014).

³⁶ Quoted in Ronald Fletcher, *The Abolitionists: The Family and Marriage Under Attack* (London: Routledge, 1988), 154.

countries are the testing sites for an unproven rash of hormonal and chemical contraceptives such as Norplant.³⁷

Some Radical Feminists have turned their attention to questions of end-of-life care for women and the presuppositions that underlie practice in that context. Thus the eighth point of convergence between contemporary Catholic scholars and Radical Feminists concerns the alarm that these feminists have expressed about the risk to vulnerable women of legalised euthanasia, given that women regularly live longer than men. For example, Susan M. Wolf in her article ‘Gender, Feminism, and Death: Physician Assisted Suicide’ argues that because women live longer and are more devalued when they are disabled or aged, they are likely to be more vulnerable to abuse by the practitioners of physician assisted suicide than men are. Wolf notes that Dutch data shows that women predominate among patients dying through euthanasia; and since women are and have traditionally been encouraged to be self-sacrificial, they may be prone to a rationale that accepts euthanasia. Such a rationale can be explained by a desire not to become a burden on their families and implies concerns about the cost of their ongoing treatment and negative assessments of the values of their continuing lives. Wolf notes that physicians may be susceptible to accepting this rationale and hence affirming women’s negative self-judgements.³⁸

The final point of convergence concerns the vigorous opposition that Radical Feminists have recently expressed to transsexualism, which they see as a fantasy of capitalist culture. In her book *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*, Sheila Jeffries writes of attempts to ‘censor all expressions of dissent towards malestream transgender ideology and to prohibit speaking platforms to those seen as heretics’ (i.e. those opposed to transgenering children and adults).³⁹ Moreover she argues that:

Transgenderism depends for its very existence on the idea that there is an “essence” of gender, a psychology and pattern of behaviour, which is suited to persons with particular bodies and identities. This is the opposite of the feminist view, which is that the idea of gender is the foundation of the political system of male domination.

The ideas and practices of gender have the potential to hurt many, ... [P]eople who feel that their “gender” does not fit their bodies may suffer psychological hurts, and then get physically “hurt” by the medical profession that diagnoses and treats them.

Increasingly the term “gender” is used, in official forms and legislation for instance to stand in for the term “sex” as if “gender” is biological, and its usage has overwhelmed the feminist understanding of gender.⁴⁰

Taken together these nine contemporary Radical Feminist stances converge with mainstream Catholic stances; and while such feminists do not believe in the Trinity and the idea that the human person has been made in the image and likeness of God and therefore has an intrinsic dignity, they do nonetheless believe in human dignity, even if they are not sure of

³⁷ Janice G. Raymond, *Women as Wombs: Reproductive Technologies and the Battle over Women’s Freedom* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), xxiii.

³⁸ Susan M. Wolf, “Gender, Feminism, and Death: Physician Assisted Suicide” in *Feminism and Bioethics: Beyond Reproduction*, ed. Susan M. Wolf, (Oxford University Press, 1996), 293.

³⁹ Sheila Jeffries, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism* (London: Routledge, 2014), 2.

⁴⁰ Jeffries, *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*, 1-6.

how to ground it. They are clearly appalled by practices that treat women as commodities and their bodies as machines.

Such commodification trivialises human sexuality and that trivialisation is clearly evident in the contemporary social practice of choosing one's gender identity on Facebook, a practice that absurdly equates freedom with unlimited consumer choice. In February 2014, the United States arm of Facebook rolled out fifty new 'gender identity' options for its users. When this was then extended into the United Kingdom in June of 2014, there were a further 21 options added. The changes in both countries were accompanied by an option to select whether the individual user wished to have a female, male or gender-neutral pronoun apply to him, her or them for relevant announcements. In such times Radically Orthodox Catholics and Radical Feminists may find that they have quite a lot in common, given their joint opposition to the devaluation of sexual difference implicit in such evident trivialisation of what it means to human persons to be female or male.

In a speech delivered to scholars of Lublin University in 1987, St John Paul II described the spiritual problematic of all humans, male and female, in the following terms:

The human person must in the name of truth stave off a double temptation: the temptation to make the truth about himself subordinate to his freedom and the temptation to make himself subordinate to the world of objects; he has to refuse to succumb to the temptation of both self-idolatry and self-subjectification.⁴¹

In the final analysis it may be argued that Christians can learn from feminists about the pathologies which develop from typically male self-idolatry and typically female self-subjectification, and secular feminists can learn from Christians about models of human relatedness which rest on a metaphysics of equality within difference.

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Journey to Poland. Address of John Paul II to the World Culture. Aula Magna of the Catholic University of Lublin*, June 9, 1987, sec. 6:3, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/speeches/1987/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870609_mondo-cultura.html (translated from the Italian by the author).