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Queen Elizabeth II
(1926–2022)

Dr. Ann Loades
(1938–2022)

Women and Christian Theology

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Anna Morgan

Priscilla and Aquila instructed Apollos more perfectly in the way of the Lord. (Acts 18:26)

Editorial

The cathedral city of Durham in the northwest of England is a city of bridges. The buildings, ancient and present-day, are located on the sides of a topographical saucer. The bottom of the saucer rises into an outcrop on the flat top of which is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Here is the cathedral with its mix of Norman and Gothic architectural markers, separated from the castle by the rectangular grassy expanse of the palace green. Round the base of the outcrop, the river Wear does a loopy meander. Therefore, the bridges.

Bridges span the Wear, connecting the central hill to the city around it. The medieval Framwellgate Bridge, wide and solid, was once the city's main point of entry. Elvet Bridge, more like a street with its restaurants and shops, was built with the inducement of indulgences (for the forgiveness of sins) handed out to volunteer workers. Kingsgate Bridge is a footbridge, but was built high enough for a ship to pass under. Prebends Bridge was located with a view in mind, and affords a picture postcard panorama of the cathedral and castle.

It seems to me that good theologians are much like bridges—each unique in form and function. They are the link between God and God's world. Dedicating their lives to the study of ancient texts and dead languages, they bring to us their understanding of God. For the longest time in the two millennia since Christ, these bridges were primarily male. This issue showcases women theologians.

Therefore, this issue is dedicated to Ann Loades (1938–2022), Professor Emerita of Divinity at Durham University. (The cover picture is of Dr. Loades being felicitated by the late Queen Elizabeth II.) Mimi Haddad, who was privileged to have Dr. Loades as her doctoral supervisor at Durham University, writes a tribute, admiring her for the enormously skillful bridge-building theologian she was.

We reproduce here Dr. Loades's St Andrews University School of Divinity 2022 Smith Lecture. In it, she tracks pioneering women

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theologians from the fourteenth-century Julian of Norwich onwards, showing how they made their contributions both while outside of and, later, from within academia.

Chongpongmeren Jamir presents Pandita Ramabai of India as the unorthodox theologian. Here was a scholar of two religious traditions, Hinduism and Christianity, who approached Christian theology, and more specifically Christology, as a quest for truth.

Jennifer Cox has brought her theological education to bridge into realities such as disability. In this article, she lays out side by side the identity markers of the community of faith in the Old Testament and New Testament to show how replacing the gendered marker (circumcision) with the gender-neutral marker (baptism) opens the doors to a concrete practice of egalitarian theology by way of women in leadership.

Juliann Bullock's sermon applies a theologically weighty metaphor of rebirth in John—a particularly feminine one. She insightfully points out how being born entails negotiating the narrow birth canal. Similarly, we cannot be born into the God's family unless we submit to being constrained within the narrowness of complete dependence on God, just as a baby depends on its mother for its birth.

Anna Morgan makes an intriguing case for how egalitarian theology rides on the back of successive feminist movements in the West. She uses the trends within Pentecostalism as a case study, showcasing women who bridged the Scriptural text and their cultural context through their vigorous leadership in matters both religious and social.

We pray that this issue of *Priscilla Papers* inspires us in our Kingdom service.

Together, side by side, in God's world.

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Theologian, Feminist, Ballerina, Mentor, and Friend: A Tribute to Dr. Ann Loades (1938–2022)

Mimi Haddad

When considering PhD supervisors, the sage advice of Dr. Aída Besançon Spencer is worth considering. She said, “Find someone you would like to become like.” Imagine my delight in learning that Professor Ann Loades had agreed to supervise my PhD at Durham University! Having taught theology at Europe’s leading theological departments, Ann was a leader of leaders. The first woman to hold a personal chair as Professor of Divinity at Durham University, she was also the first woman president of the Society for the Study of Theology.¹ In 2001, Ann was the first woman to join the governing body of Durham Cathedral as a Chapter Member. What is more, in recognition of her theological achievements, Queen Elizabeth II awarded Ann the title Commander of the British Empire (CBE), an honor that, again, distinguished Ann from her peers.

A leading theologian, Ann Loades lectured and published widely.... The sheer force of her competence was balanced by a tender heart filled with compassion for those at the margins.

A leading theologian, Ann lectured and published widely with a focus on feminist theology and related topics, both practical and theoretical.² To me, her brilliance and penetrating critique, coupled with the speed at which her thoughts flowed, was initially daunting. The sheer force of her competence was always balanced by a tender heart filled with compassion for those at the margins. As her PhD student, it was challenging to discuss a topic she knew better than most resources I consulted. Yet, she humbly guided my research even

as my thoughts were in process, investing herself fully in serving me and those I was committed to serving. As I approached my dissertation defense, our relationship deepened around our shared love of ballet, spiritual theology, and equipping the church through our passions, our God-given gifts, and our advocacy for women’s humanity, dignity, and leadership.

My favorite memories are the post-graduate seminars Ann led yearly. These lectures nearly always included two to three comments in ancient and modern languages (for emphasis), and they often ended with jokes told in Latin. While attending academic conferences in the US, I had the pleasure of taking Ann on short tours around Minnesota and my favorite locations in Colorado, where I grew up. We also enjoyed time together at Gladstone’s Library in Wales and while working in Cambridge—where we shared meals and lengthy conversations, both personal and professional. When in the UK, my husband and I prioritized visits with Ann at the University of St Andrews (Scotland), where she served as an honorary professor of theology.³ In turn, Ann not only contributed to CBE’s academic journal, *Priscilla Papers*,⁴ she was also a strong supporter and advocate of CBE’s work.

The last year of her life, she asked if I would coedit a revision of her groundbreaking book, *Feminist Theology: A Reader*. This was an honor I hardly deserved, but it was instructive of hanging in there with those we find initially intimidating. From my fears of uttering a sentence in her presence, to spending years and years dreaming and working beside Ann on our shared goals, her untimely death was an opportunity both to grieve and to express gratitude for a humble leader who gave so much to so many. We love you, Ann Loades.

Notes

1. Ann served as the editor of the journal *Theology* from 1991 to 1997. She was an Honorary Professorial Fellow at St Chad’s College, a Lay Canon Emerita of Durham Cathedral, and a former Chair of St Chad’s Council.
2. In 1987 Ann was the Scott Holland lecturer—an annual lecture series given by an Anglican scholar of religion and society. Ann gave the Spring 2022 Smith Lecture, titled “From Exception to Norm? Women in Theology.” A selected bibliography follows: *The Serendipity of Life’s Encounters*, My Theology series (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2021); “Reforming Women in England and Scotland: Claiming Authority to Speak of God,” in *Contemporary Feminist Theologies: Power, Authority, Love*, ed. Kerrie Handasyde, Cathryn McKinney, and Rebekah Pryor (Routledge, 2021) 100–16; “The Revelation of Abuse: Some Personal Reflections,” *The Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal* 5/1 (Spring 2021) 17–30; *Grace Is Not Faceless: Reflections on Mary*, ed. Stephen Burns (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2021); *Grace and Glory in One Another’s Faces: Preaching and Worship* (Canterbury, 2020); *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (SPCK, 1990); *Searching for Lost Coins: Explorations in Christianity and Feminism* (SPCK, 1987). A book of essays in her honor, *Exchanges of Grace*, was published by SCM HAWARDEN Press in 2008.
3. After retiring in 2003, Ann became emeritus professor at Durham University. In 2009 she became an honorary professor at the University of St Andrews where she also supervised research students and contributed in the university’s Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts.
4. See “C. S. Lewis on Gender,” *Priscilla Papers* 24/1 (Winter 2010) 19–24, <https://cbeinternational.org/resource/cs-lewis-gender/>.



Mimi Haddad serves as president and CEO of CBE International. She has taught as an adjunct associate professor of historical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, Olivet University and has taught for institutes and organizations worldwide. She is a graduate of the University of Colorado and Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (Summa Cum Laude). She holds a PhD in historical theology from the University of Durham, England. Mimi received an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Palmer Theological Seminary of Eastern University in 2013. She was a founding member of the Evangelicals and Women Study Section at the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) and Evangelicals for Justice. She continues to serve on the leadership of ETS’s Evangelicals and Women.

From Exception to Norm? Women in Theology

Ann Loades

This essay arose from my contribution to the lecture series which commemorates the remarkable achievements of the Smith sisters, known in the course of time as Dr. Margaret Gibson and Dr. Agnes Lewis. My tactics in this essay are to offer a look, both retrospective and prospective, via a narrative with comments which may, I hope, stimulate some discussion. I am hoping that women in this day and age may continue to contribute to theology and religious studies, as they have for some considerable time both without and within an institutional base of some kind. In other words, in engaging with the past I am looking and hoping for stimulus for the present and the future. It is recognised, however, that there will be problems to face in engaging with theology and religious studies, since some of these relate to issues intrinsic to Christian tradition in much need of reform. Since this particular lecture series is the gift of the University of St Andrews, I relate my essay to connections there so far as possible.

The Smith Sisters as Independent Scholars

Since some readers may know little or nothing about the Smith sisters, I would urge those of you unfamiliar with their story to track down the book about them by Janet Martin Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai* (2009). She delivered the first Smith lecture. Her lecture-presentation on her book is available online as delivered in the Mullen Library of the Catholic University in Washington, DC. I will be returning to this book by Soskice at the conclusion of this essay, since she continues to be a redoubtable contributor to constructive discussion of theology and the new situation in which women have found themselves, as theology has developed in a variety of locations in the last century.

Let us recall a little about the twin Smith sisters, and by doing so alert ourselves to why and how it was that well into the twentieth century a few women were able to contribute to theology, following in the footsteps of those who had previously put their energies into social reform. To understand the situation in the era of the Smith twins it is, I think, helpful to remember that through the first part of the twentieth century, children in Britain left school to enter the world of work by the ages of eleven or twelve, and even by the middle of the twentieth century the vast majority left school by age fifteen. We recall that households needed every penny their members could contribute if they were to survive. Managing a household required the energies of everyone apart from the very young or the very old, one and all vulnerable to disease or accident. In any event the elderly would have had little or no chance to save for the days when they could no longer work.

I am hoping that women in this day and age may continue to contribute to theology and religious studies, as they have for some considerable time.

So far as women's engagement with theology was concerned, much therefore depended on being born into a family with considerable financial resources, with parents delighted to be able to educate clever daughters. Daughters

could and did benefit from what parents themselves could offer by way of instruction, who might well also employ live-in governesses to teach several languages, with other subject areas brought in by tutors. Beyond that, in the nineteenth century there had developed some excellent "academic" boarding schools in which their daughters might spend just a few years to take them well beyond what they might be offered in their homes. This became especially important if they were to seize the new opportunities for university-level education as these became available, even if actually being awarded a degree was not in prospect. It was of course important to avoid being thought to be intellectual, since that could well damage their marriage prospects! In addition, a family might well have sufficient resources to fund holidays in mainland Europe, such expeditions being a welcome opportunity to explore different cultures and religious traditions. What some young women did with such opportunities obviously varied from time to time and place to place, but it was possible that they might find interests in the "visual" dimension of theology in one form or another. Writing books recording their travels, and the attention they gave to "shrines and cities," could be one important way of exploring theology, not least given the opportunity to survey different forms of worship.

To turn to the Smith sisters: Margaret and Agnes were twins having to grow up without their mother, who had died three weeks after their birth (1843). Home territory was Irvine, Presbyterian Ayrshire. Their father had inherited a fortune, and he organized trips abroad for them, all on condition that they had learned the relevant language. Hence, their initial visits to France, Germany, Spain, and Italy. They inherited his wealth on his death when they were twenty-three, by which time they had become perfectly capable of organizing their own expeditions, accompanied, of course, by a chaperone. Agnes became a travel-writer and novelist. Both added Greek to their Latin and other languages, as they needed them.

In 1880 Margaret married James Young Gibson, a translator of Spanish literature. She completed some of his work when he died from tuberculosis just four years later. It is noteworthy that women wrote memoirs of their fathers and husbands in this era—another resource for understanding their perspectives on their own lives. Biographies of the women themselves were yet to be written when they became sufficiently important! Agnes moved into the Gibson household, and their joint projects continued, e.g., learning Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac, and photographing manuscripts at the point of discovery.

Then in 1888, Agnes married the Revd. Samuel Savage Lewis, Librarian of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. He died unexpectedly of heart failure two years later, having provided initial contact with some of the scholars of the university. The cooperation of such men was essential for some—but by no means all—expeditions to difficult places. Equally, without the linguistic skills of the sisters, some of the extraordinary discoveries made would have had to wait for later generations, such as the finds in the Cairo Genizah of a hoard of Hebrew manuscripts crucial for the history of the Jewish people.

Cambridge contacts also made possible publication of their work, resulting in an extraordinary list by each of them taken separately, quite apart from joint publications. Together they also produced dozens of articles in newspapers, magazines, and journals, the result of the long hours of work they enjoyed as “independent scholars”—a role which became more familiar in the twentieth century.

The sisters donated land to enable Westminster College to move from London to Cambridge in 1899. The college website includes portraits of them wearing academic dress, but not, of course, that of the University of Cambridge because, apart from the sisters being Scots and Presbyterian, Cambridge did not authorise degrees for women until 1948. In contrast, Durham had enabled women to graduate in all faculties by 1895—save Divinity, which was associated with ordination. The sisters could in time choose from a range of academic robes, the available options being from a doctorate from Halle to honour Agnes, Doctor of Theology degrees to both of them from Heidelberg, a DLitt from Trinity College, Dublin, and, in 1904, Doctor of Laws from St Andrews. Finally, in 1915, the sisters were awarded the Triennial Gold Medal of the Royal Asiatic Society for their “special eminence in Oriental research.” Margaret died in 1920, and Agnes in 1926.

It is clear from recent evaluation and interest post-*Sisters of Sinai* that a reassessment of the sisters’ work is still to be achieved. Such reassessment, of course, requires specialist scholarly expertise but continues to be important for “history of the Bible” projects such as those undertaken by John Barton, Bart Ehrman, and the digitalisation of texts by David Parker. All such projects reveal much of the fascinating and complicated history of the Bible in one or other of its forms.¹

Even without expertise in specialist languages it could be interesting to read Agnes’s novels and records of travel, especially the work she discovered written over the text of Old Syriac Gospels. She had, of course, learned that it was common practice to scrape off a text written on expensive vellum (animal skin) in order to write another. The vellum she discovered was first and foremost a Syriac Gospels text, but from the over-writing she translated and produced *Select Narratives of Holy Women* (about a dozen of them), published in 1900. This includes material about Pelagia, a celebrated courtesan who found peace in the desert, and the astonishing Eugenia, who apparently lived as a man and became abbot of a monastery!

Agnes’ work reminds us of Sr. Benedicta Ward’s *Harlots of the Desert* (1987) and *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (1975). Ward was a member of what is now a very small Church of England religious order, the Sisters of the Love of God, and a distinguished historian

and interpreter of Latin theology and history, especially of Bede and St. Anselm.² After a grammar-school education, her first degree was from the University of Manchester, and she received her second, a doctorate from Oxford, in her mid-forties. Her interests connect us both to the legacy of the Smith sisters but also beyond them to those of Evelyn Underhill, Lucy Menzies, Helen Waddell, and Dorothy L. Sayers.³

Grace Warrack and the Discovery of Theologian Julian of Norwich

Before turning to that group, however, we need to attend to the work of another brilliant linguist, Grace Warrack.⁴ She was born in 1855 in Leith, into a well-to-do Presbyterian family of four daughters. Warrack’s mother died in 1857, but the girls’ father saw to their education. Warrack became a distinguished linguist in both French and Italian and tracked down surviving copies of Julian of Norwich’s *Showings* in both Paris and London.

Showings, written in the fourteenth–fifteenth century, is commonly described as the first book of theology written in vernacular English. Its author was an anchoress—that is, one who had voluntarily “side-stepped” into an exceptional form of religious life. This meant being enclosed in a cell with a funeral rite, from which she would never again emerge alive. She was clearly well educated, able to write as well as to read. She would have a “squint” into the church by which she could follow the Mass, and a window at which she could be consulted. She would need a servant as go-between to access the outside world. Someone supplied her with the writing materials she needed and collected her book from her cell after her death.

Those who spent long hours in unwelcome solitude during the COVID-19 pandemic may be best able to appreciate the long period of preparation she must have undertaken—perhaps in a Benedictine house—in order to opt for such a life. If you are visiting Norwich Cathedral you can see the retable of Christ’s crucifixion installed there in 1372, which Julian may possibly have seen before her enclosure the following year, aged thirty.⁵

As for Warrack, we know that she worked on the London manuscript copy of Julian’s book. She transcribed and edited it, and published it in 1901, with a frontispiece by Phoebe Anna Traquair. The latter was Irish, a contributor to the Scottish Arts and Crafts movement, and married to a Scot who became Keeper of what is now known as the National Museum of Scotland. Much of her work is to be seen in and around Edinburgh. Warrack herself was also a patron of the arts, giving much advice (not always welcome) to the stained-glass artist Douglas Strachan when he was working on the windows of what was then the High Kirk of the Free Church of Scotland. She died in 1932. The windows were completed just two years later. Then, in just another two years, the building became New College Library, where the windows can still be seen. They remain a valuable example of the interplay of the arts with theology.

The importance of Warrack’s publication of Julian’s text, which had survived the upheavals of the centuries, has been confirmed by different kinds of readers. There has been much interest from that first publication up to our own day, despite long-standing suspicion of those who claim to have “direct personal experience” of the “divine,” let alone if such experience is combined with a woman writing theology. One memorable text from *Showings* continues to

be: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Thanks to Warrack, Julian’s book has become one of the most widely read texts in western Christian religious history and has been appropriated in various ways by an extraordinary range of writers. These include medieval historian Margaret Spufford (who endured an agonising experience of illness in her own person as well as in her daughter);⁶ Iris Murdoch in two of her novels, *The Bell* and *Nuns and Soldiers*; the poet Denise Levertov; and author Annie Dillard.⁷

Julian’s book has long familiarised her readers with the metaphor of divine “mothering,” which she integrates into her exploration of central Christian doctrines. The scriptural origins of the metaphor are to be found in the last chapter of the book of Isaiah, and in the lament of Jesus in Matt 23:37, Jesus’s longing to gather people together “even as a hen gathers her children under her wings.” It became familiar in monastic spirituality in the Middle Ages, and one easily accessible example is to be found in Anselm’s Prayer to St. Paul, in Ward’s edition of *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm*, where both the Lord and, amazingly, St. Paul are addressed as “mother.”⁸ Two examples from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries provide instances of how theology that has originated in a context far different from our own can nonetheless be taken to heart in our own time.

The metaphor of “mother” may, for all sorts of reasons, have seemed too startling for some readers (as indeed it seems to me) in a prayer to St. Paul, but one person integrated the metaphor into her theology, that is, Grace Jantzen (London and Manchester). She was a member of the Society of Friends, a tradition not commonly associated with formal theology. An expert in the philosophy of Foucault prompted Jantzen to ask a question about what it might mean to live as “ anchoress” in modernity. That in turn was one way of asking the question of what it could mean to be a feminist and a theologian in a modern university. Taking seriously Hannah Arendt’s focus on the importance of “natality”—the capacity to start anew—and true to the fundamental commitment of the Friends to “peacemaking,” she developed a profound critique of what she identified as the violence and “necrophilia” of much Christian theology, arguing rather for delight in the world in which we find ourselves, for flourishing and fulfilment.⁹

Not everyone can appropriate Julian in that constructive way, however, as Karen O’Donnell of Sarum College explains in her ground-breaking books on feminist “trauma theology,” on which she gave a seminar in St Andrews last February. Trauma theology, in her case, is concerned with “reproductive loss,” interrupting the silence surrounding pregnancy loss—one example of women’s experience completely ignored in theology. Like Jantzen, O’Donnell both requires a critique of much theology (including that of Julian), but also the exploration of traditions of prayer to be found in some other mystics whose writings succeed in enabling believers to pray in and from some profoundly dark and empty places.¹⁰

I note, however, that so far there has been very little attention given in trauma theology to male experiences of grief in response to reproductive and pregnancy loss, and the loss of born children. In addition, we may note the lives of living children are almost completely

ignored in theology, with the exception of some Lutheran theologians in the USA so far as I can see. Children are attended to, not as “persons but as objects of abuse.” I note also that the British Academy has a project about the wellbeing of children in our time which, as far as I can tell, has no theologian involved and, unsurprisingly, has no reference to theology.

I am ashamed to have to admit that it has been only very recently that I have put together the connections between the virtual absence of children from most worshipping congregations and the culture of indifference to their well-being so widespread in our culture more generally, despite the central importance of children in the lives of human communities.¹¹ So both O’Donnell and Jantzen may be seen as important examples of how women may reassess theology when they become members of an institution (university or college). Following in the footsteps of one’s predecessors may prompt much-needed radical reassessment and reform of theology.

Other Early Women Theologians

We could of course examine the lives of a number of women, each of whom, so to speak, embodied the longstanding problem for women derived from 1 Tim 2:12: “I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (KJV). One from Julian’s era is Margery Kempe, born in 1343, of the parish of St. Margaret, King’s Lynn (which still exists and in which she is now commemorated). She was probably able to read but required the help of those who took her seriously to write down for her a kind of autobiography.

Kempe, for years, suffered from comparison with Julian, whom she visited for advice—the only person she could trust with her own “revelations.” It has at last been realized that the spirituality of a married woman who had given birth to a dozen or more children and who helped her husband run their brewery was bound to be different from that of a celibate anchoress. Thanks to the work of recent historians, we now know far more about her context.

Kempe arranged with her husband to leave him for a time to improve her status in a culture in which virginity and celibacy was most highly valued, with widowhood and marriage the least. Kempe became a traveller to pilgrimage sites in England to begin with, and then joined groups of pilgrims to the Holy Land (a predecessor of the Smith sisters). She is sometimes referred to as the patron saint of travel agents. She happens to exemplify the longstanding problem derived from 1 Tim 2:12, because wherever Kempe went, she spoke of the gospel, and so, was repeatedly threatened with imprisonment or being burnt alive. Julian was safe in her enclosure and probably died in 1416, by which time teaching in what was to become the University of St Andrews had just begun. Kempe was anything but safe until she returned home, probably dying in 1438. She would have known of the death of her parish priest, executed in London by being burnt at the stake in 1401 as a “Loller,” a “mumbler.” This was a term of contempt for someone who read Scripture in the vernacular, as we all now do thanks to some of those who even lost their lives for making the translations.¹²

We could also trace the problem of women teaching and preaching in the astonishing progress of the remarkable entrepreneur, Mary

Ward. This was a Yorkshire woman born in 1585, a pioneer of women's ministry, also widely travelled in both England and mainland Europe. She founded a major teaching order focussed on the education of girls world-wide, the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Since 2002, there is a branch of her foundation able to identify themselves as the "Congregation of Jesus" (C. J.). Women, she said, "in time to come will do much." Ward died in 1645, in the century which saw the birth of many virtually unmanageable female preachers and prophets, one of whom was Margaret Fell (of the Society of Friends) who, in 1666, published her claim for "women's speaking justified, proved and allowed of by the Scriptures."

The Modern Era

Instructive though each of their predecessors is, I now want to return to the era of the Smith sisters, first to Evelyn Underhill, some thirty years younger than they, then to Lucy Menzies, a little younger again. In both cases, a familiar pattern re-emerges. Underhill was the only child born in the household of a lawyer, who moved from Birmingham and developed a distinguished career in London. She had an uncle who was a parish priest in Liverpool, and a cousin who was an Anglo-Catholic modernist in Birmingham (subsequently a bishop). Her own immediate family seem to have been no more than conventionally Christian, hence, the later importance of Baron Friedrich von Hügel in her life.

Languages learned and tested in expeditions to pre-war Europe and three years away at school led to attendance at the "Ladies Department" of King's College, London, through which university-level education became possible for women. Moreover, the university recognised her distinction, making her first an Honorary Fellow, and then its first woman Fellow in 1927, acknowledging thereby her poetry and her three novels, as well as her book on *Christian Mysticism* (1911). This latter was the first of her publications on mysticism for a vast reading public and was much emended during her lifetime. Eventually, and under the tutelage of Baron von Hügel, in 1921, she recommitted herself to public identification with the Church of England and developed a reputation for giving talks to audiences of both women and men, including the clergy. She was the first woman to lecture in Oxford under the aegis of Manchester College, in 1921. She did not threaten the clergy by arguing for the ordination of women, however!

Underhill began to visit Pleshey, the retreat house of the Diocese of Chelmsford in 1922, and two years later began to direct retreats there (and in many other places). She soon roped Menzies into Pleshey, who eventually took over the retreats herself between 1928 and 1938 when Underhill became too exhausted to do so and had another major book to finish. (So much for 1 Tim 2:12!)

A major interpreter of Underhill and her relationship with Menzies is now Robyn Wrigley-Carr, who gained a doctorate in St Andrews. On a visit to Pleshey, Wrigley-Carr recognised first one and then the second of the prayer books written up by Underhill for the conduct of retreats, books long assumed to have been lost. She combined them into one with helpful notes, published it in 2018, and found herself with an international best-seller on her hands. From there she has published a series of books and articles both on Underhill and on her relationship with Menzies. She was a contributor to the

international conference on Underhill's work based at Pleshey in 2021, the centenary of the latter's own re-identification as a member of the Church of England.

Wrigley-Carr has most recently attended especially to Underhill's exceptional understanding of worship, a matter which is of central importance in the life of Christian churches, in all its ecclesial dimensions. This is another area largely ignored in theology, except by liturgists, not commonly to be found in academic departments in the UK.¹³ Underhill's 1936 book on worship yet awaits re-evaluation and development, and that apart, is in my view very possibly reliant on Menzies's insight into both the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Episcopal Church (SEC) as they then were. Menzies had joined the SEC in 1925, and her entry into the SEC Calendar is the result of the effort made by her grandson, Mr. John Hunter.

In 1938, Underhill was offered a Doctor of Divinity degree by the University of Aberdeen, although she was too frail to make the journey. She died in 1941, leaving Menzies as her literary executor. Menzies collected and edited her work, and embarked on a biography of Underhill which was to be finished by Margaret Cropper in 1958. The accidental rediscovery of Cropper—Lakeland poet, hymn writer, and friend of both Underhill and Menzies—we owe to Sabine Hyland.¹⁴

We find in Menzies another case of formidable education, in that she and her sister were born into the household of Professor Alan Menzies, at the time a Church of Scotland minister in Abernethy. He sent his daughters to Heidelberg where there were some family connections, acquiring German in addition to certain other languages. As an adult, Menzies established herself as a translator and writer, with perhaps a sense of light relief producing *The First Friend: An Anthology of the Friendships of Man and Dog Compiled from the Literature of All Ages, 1400 BC–1921 AD* (1929).

In my view, she had a more secure and extensive education than that of Underhill. In particular, as William Hyland has shown, her two major books of the 1920s on St. Columba and then on St. Margaret reveal her profound sympathy with medieval sanctity.¹⁵ It was Underhill's review of the former which introduced them to one another. For these and a formidable range of publications Menzies herself was awarded the degree of Doctor of Divinity in St Andrews in 1954 (the year of her death). It is as the result of Professor Judith Wolfe's initiative that we have a portrait of Menzies now hanging in College Hall in the School of Divinity in St Andrews. The Revd. Giles Dove has seen to the restoration of her family gravestone. This particular group of women—Evelyn Underhill, Lucy Menzies, and Margaret Cropper—must surely have been delighted by the honorary DLitt degree awarded to Helen Waddell by the University of St Andrews in 1936, one of many such honours, and to that extent comparable to the recognition of the work of the Smith sisters.

Unexpected and Unpredictable Changes up to the Present Day

It is with Helen Waddell and Dorothy Sayers that we can identify a significant shift important for my narrative, notwithstanding that their lives began in profoundly different circumstances.

Waddell was the youngest in a family of ten children born in Tokyo, where her father was a Presbyterian missionary who

returned to Ireland when Helen was eleven, whereas Sayers was the single child of a Church of England clergyman. Both were able to gain BA degrees—Waddell in English Language and Literature, from Queen's, Belfast in 1911, and Sayers in Medieval Languages from Oxford in 1920, the first year in which that was possible for women. Both had to earn their own livings without any institutional base; both published plays that were performed on stage. Sayers also responded to invitations to write plays for performance in cathedrals, never losing an opportunity to bring doctrine alive for those who attended, and she also became widely appreciated for the “religious drama” she wrote for the BBC, a new institution available in every home, and a wholly new medium for the transmission of “theology.”

Like Menzies, both Waddell and Sayers turned to the medieval world for their theology. In Waddell's case, this was the period in which learning in the Western Latin-speaking world was shifting from monastery and cathedral to city and university, as in the case of St Andrews. She, above all, brought the literature and life of that world to the imagination and sympathy of readers of her own time.¹⁶ Both reached back to the world which fascinated Sr. Benedicta Ward. Waddell produced *Beasts and Saints* (1934), a rare instance of a work springing from the Celtic world, illustrated by Robert Gibbings's enchanting woodcuts. Sayers turned to the Council of Nicea for her last play, *The Emperor Constantine* (1951), written for Colchester, with a shortened version performed in London on stage. Both produced best sellers. Waddell wrote a brilliant novel on Peter Abelard, (1933; three editions in six months, translated into nine languages), familiarising readers with Heloise. Sayers published the first volume of her translation of Dante's *The Divine Comedy* in 1949, relating it to the horrors of the recently concluded war.

Both Waddell and Sayers were to be honoured with biographies. Dame Felicitas Corrigan (OSB) was awarded a major prize for hers on Waddell.¹⁷ The distinguished Italian scholar Barbara Reynolds received a DLitt degree from Durham in the centenary year, 1995, as the major biographer of Sayers, editor of her letters and of much else. (This was the centenary of the Durham university decision by which degrees had been made possible for women in all faculties except Divinity.) In addition, both writers also worked well outside the limits of theology: Waddell on the eighteenth-century Abbé Prévost and Manon Lescaut, and Sayers inventing detective fiction about her own era. In many different ways, both were sources of theology for their readers, well beyond the curricula in theology characteristic of their era.

One might possibly have thought that from this point on, women might be able to identify institutional positions for which they could apply or to which they might be invited. Take for instance, Helen Oppenheimer (1926–2022). Her education began at home with a governess, and then in a nearby day school. Once her family moved from London to Cheltenham to escape wartime London, she completed an excellent education as a boarder at Cheltenham Ladies College, from which she had thought to proceed to read English in Oxford. Her headmistress and her mother put their heads together to help her change her mind, however, and she embarked on the BA in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. She graduated with an excellent degree, married in 1947, and then completed a BPhil.

She joined a distinguished Oxford group known as the “Metaphysicals” (resisting the dominance of logical positivism). To them she dedicated her first book *Incarnation and Immanence* (1973). She was roped into a sequence of Church of England commissions to consider a variety of reports important for legislative changes, given that she made a significant contribution to questions about the integration of theology with ethics. In 1960 Robert Runcie became Principal of Cuddesdon College, which prepared candidates for ordination. He invited her to give a course of lectures on theology and ethics, which was at the time a significant innovation in such establishments. She became a most distinguished preacher.¹⁸ When Runcie became Archbishop, he awarded her a Lambeth Doctor of Divinity in 1993, her first formal qualification in theology. However, she remained an “independent scholar,” for her social position was such that she was the last person to need a post in a university, and she could be influential in many other contexts instead, like some of her predecessors.

Oppenheimer was thus well placed to aid the establishment of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics. Its first president was Peter Baelz, by then Dean of Durham, and she became its second. She probably was the first woman to become a “president” of a society concerned with theology in the Church of England. She presided over the society's first conference in 1985, the theme of which was “Power and Authority.” A major paper on that occasion was devoted to revealing some of the crisis in theology so far as women were concerned.

A New and Challenging World

The point here is that access to institutions (rather than working as “independent scholars”) occurred in the era in which the critique of Christian tradition became possible not as “reform” but as “rejection.” Just three years after the death of Waddell, Mary Daly had published the first of her critiques of the Christian tradition as she had received it: “We do not wish to be redeemed by a god, to be adopted as sons, or to have the spirit of a god's son poured into our hearts, crying “Father.””¹⁹ More was to come from many other writers. A controversial paper at the first Christian Ethics conference in 1985 was delivered by Daphne Hampson on “Power and Gender.”²⁰ Hampson, by this stage in her career, had a permanent position in the School of Divinity at St Andrews, but by this time had concluded both that Christianity was false and that it was detrimental to women. Nevertheless, she was given a personal chair in St Andrews in 2002 in “post-Christian thought,” which no doubt made for an interesting time in the School of Divinity!

Thus, it occurred that by the time women gained access to positions in theology (and religious studies), a sustained critique of Christian tradition had developed. Yet some also negotiated the critique, and my example here is Martin Soskice with whose work we began. Soskice (born in 1951) came to study Biblical Studies in Sheffield. This was when she could not gain entry to the universities which most interested her in the USA, because they did not take women. She subsequently completed a doctorate in Oxford and married. In 1979, Cuddesdon admitted women in training for ordination, and she applied for her first teaching appointment there, given that there had to be at least one woman on the staff. Once appointed, she became an acute analyst and critic of both Cuddesdon and

Oxford, publishing essays on the subject in the early 1990s, which is where I first encountered her writing.²¹ She was President of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain (1992–1994), an indication that she was never convinced by the arguments of some of the Christian tradition’s most perceptive critics.

During her time at Cuddesdon she finished her first book, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (1985), whilst caring for her young daughter. When I was in a college in the USA working with a colleague on a book in philosophy of religion, I had an unforgettable experience. It was my task to try out pieces proposed for the book with a final year class. For one seminar, I allocated a chapter from Soskice’s book to one young man for him to introduce to the others. At the end of his presentation, he blurted out: “This stuff is so difficult, I can’t believe it’s written by a woman.” I leave you with your own reflections on what assumptions about women might be revealed by his observation, and what their implication might be for women in institutions concerned with theology and religious studies!

Notes

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1. See Rebecca J. W. Jefferson, “Sisters of Semitics: A Fresh Appreciation of the Scholarship of Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson,” *Medieval Feminist Forum: Journal for the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship* 45/1 (2009) 23–49; and <https://www.academia.edu> for a wealth of references.
2. Sr Benedicta Ward died on 23 May 2022, after this Lecture was delivered.
3. See the appreciation of her work in *Prayer and Thought in Monastic Tradition. Essays in Honour of Benedicta Ward SLG*, ed. Santha Bhattacharji, Rowan Williams, and Dominic Mattos (Bloomsbury, T&T Clark, 2014).
4. See Jane Shaw, “Grace Warrack, Julian of Norwich and the Early Twentieth-century Revival of Mysticism,” *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal* 5/4 (2021) 11–20.
5. Ann Loades, “Reforming Women in England and Scotland: Claiming Authority to Speak of God,” in *Contemporary Feminist Theologies: Power, Authority, Love*, ed. Kerrie Handasyde, Cathryn McKinney, and Rebekah Pryor (Routledge, 2021) 100–16.
6. Some extracts from Professor Spufford’s reflections on her own experience (which resulted in a television documentary), and some writing published for the first time by both herself and her daughter are to be found in Ann Loades, *Spiritual Classics from the Late Twentieth Century* (National Society and Church House, 1995) 68–103.
7. For a discussion of all three together see Susan Yore, *The Mystic Way in Postmodernity: Transcending Theological Boundaries in the Writings of Iris Murdoch, Denise Levertov, and Annie Dillard* (Lang, 2009).
8. *The Prayers and Meditations of St Anselm with the Prologion*, trans. and ed. Sister Benedicta Ward (Penguin, 1973) 152–56.
9. See Morna Joy, “Grace Jantzen and the Power of Love,” in *Grace Jantzen: Redeeming the Present*, ed. Elaine Graham (Ashgate, 2009) 23–39.
10. Karen O’Donnell, *The Dark Womb: Re-Conceiving Theology through Reproductive Loss* (SCM, 2022).
11. Ann Loades, “Children are Church,” in *Lively Oracles of God: Perspectives on the Bible and Liturgy*, ed. Gordon Jeanes and Bridget Nichols (Liturgical, 2022) 206–26.

12. See Loades, “Reforming Women,” in *Contemporary Feminist Theologies*, 100–16.
13. Robyn Wrigley-Carr, “‘Essentials’ for Worship: Evelyn Underhill’s Prayer Book,” *Studia Liturgica* 5/2 (2021) 187–202.
14. Sabine Hyland, “To Reveal the Eternal: The Spiritual Friendship of Margaret Cropper and Evelyn Underhill,” *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal* 5/4 (2021) 55–66.
15. William Hyland, “Lucy Menzies (1882–1954) and the Christian Ideal of Sanctity in Medieval Scotland,” *Scottish Episcopal Institute Journal* 5/4 (2021) 39–55.
16. See Gabriel Daly, “Helen Waddell,” *The Furrow* 16/8 (1965) 479–83, as he writes not an obituary but gratitude for the sheer enjoyment as well as profit she brought to her readers.
17. In addition, see Jennifer FitzGerald, *Helen Waddell and Maude Clarke* (Lang, 2012); Jennifer FitzGerald, ed., *Helen Waddell Reassessed* (Lang, 2013).
18. See Loades, *Spiritual Classics*, 1–43, for some examples of her writing.
19. For an introduction to Mary Daly’s importance, see “Practical Consequences,” in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (SPCK, 1990) 181–94; the quotation is from Mary Daly, *Pure Lust* (Women’s Press, 1984) 9.
20. Daphne Hampson, “On Power and Gender,” *Modern Theology* 4/3 (1988) 234–50.
21. Her work from this period is selected in Loades, *Spiritual Classics*, 46–67.



Ann Loades (1938–2022) was Professor Emerita of Divinity at Durham University, England, and Honorary Professor at the University of St Andrews, Scotland.

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The Theological Quest of an Indian Woman: Dogma, Doubts, and Debates in Pandita Ramabai's Early Christian Life

Chongpongmeren Jamir

"I have not a faith which is called very often child-like,"¹ insisted Mary Rama, as she wrestled with doctrinal difficulties as a novice to the Christian faith. "I wish I had it, but you know I had to give up that which really was child-like—and which had come to me from my childhood, my old faith—entirely, and take a new one, which seemed more rational, purer and nobler."²

Ramabai could not receive Christianity "merely as a historical revelation," but demanded philosophical evidence showing that "such and such things are metaphysical necessities."

Rechristened Mary Rama, Ramabai Dongre Madhavi (popularly known as Pandita Ramabai) was a Brahmin woman from India. She was baptised into the Christian faith on September 29, 1883 at Wantage, England. (She was at the time residing at the convent of the Anglican Community of Saint Mary the Virgin, hereafter referred to as Wantage sisters.) Though she was convinced of "the truthfulness of Christ's religion,"³ she struggled with the concepts of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, which to her seemed to indicate polytheism. Suggestions from her mentors to accept the historic Christian dogmas with childlike faith were not helpful. As a Hindu, she was ascribed the rare title of Pandita ("scholar") due to her mastery of the Hindu scripture. Though a beginner in the Christian faith, she studied the Bible with the critical eye of a religious scholar. Recognizing this tendency, Dorothy Beale (principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College, where Ramabai was enrolled for study) observed that Ramabai could not receive Christianity "merely as a historical revelation," but demanded philosophical evidence showing that "such and such things are metaphysical necessities."⁴ Thus, Beale urged for patience in dealing with Ramabai, yet cautioned that if left unattended she could end up a heretic. The question on the orthodoxy of Ramabai's Christian faith alarmed her mentors in England. Sister Geraldine, her godmother in baptism, and Canon William Butler, who baptised her, were aggrieved by what they saw as a drifting away from the faith. The former accused Ramabai of betraying the faith she was baptised into by allowing "poisonous weeds of heresy" to influence her through her readings of "anti-Catholic" (that is, anti-Anglican) literature.⁵ Butler issued her an ultimatum to either accept the church's teaching or return to her former faith.⁶

The frantic exchange of letters between Ramabai and her mentors informs us of the extent of her doubts and of the severity of their criticism. However, Ramabai's autobiography, published in 1907, makes no mention of these doctrinal problems. This is also the case

with her numerous biographies, which focus rather on her exploits as a saint or as a reformer, or on her conversion experience.⁷ Keith White briefly touches on Ramabai's contention with the Anglican church, though choosing to focus on the question of authority.⁸ Her "contention" with Anglican authority has been interpreted in existing literature as both political (a refusal to submit to colonial authority⁹) and social ("anti-institutionalism,"¹⁰ "feminism"¹¹). S. M. Adhav refers to the controversy in toned-down language: "religious fluctuation," which resulted from the "un-Christian influence of so-called Christians" or "swarms of Non-conformists who buzzed around her like mosquitos."¹² Maya Burger, in her analysis of Ramabai's autobiography, suggests that after undergoing what Ramabai called a "conversion experience" in 1891, there was "no more space to debate or to show her previous doubts."¹³

However, the lack of closure on Ramabai's doctrinal difficulties needs to be addressed. Existing literature tends to either overlook or circumvent the elephant in the room. Analysing the theological thought of someone of the caliber of Ramabai has the potential to provide vital insights into the promises and challenges of the encounter between Christianity and educated Hindus in present-day India.

The Early Struggle with Christology

U. Chakravarti calls the "marginalization" of Ramabai from mainstream history in India "a suppression."¹⁴ Though much biographical work on Ramabai is available, she is often overlooked in the general construction of Indian history. Similarly, White speaks of her marginalisation in the writings of Christian history.¹⁵ More acute, however, is her marginalization among Indian Christian theologians, though she is one of the most learned Indian converts from Hinduism. White identifies Ramabai as a pioneer of a "radical form of theology," one that "was lived rather than written" (for which Sadhu Sunder Singh had received all the plaudits thus far), which is being adopted only recently by mainstream Asian theology.¹⁶ The questions she asked on authority, Scripture, and dogma show the workings of a "cultured, sensitive, and compassionate mind" who was "not prepared to sacrifice its freedom of thought and expression for any price."¹⁷

How did her training as a Pandita and her identity as an Indian woman influence her thoughts? How did it shape her appropriation and practice of the Christian faith? Cultural history has shown that practices are performed within a cultural web of significance, whereby the meaning of an act can be derived by retrieving the "particular cultural codes underlying the acts."¹⁸ Informed by cultural history, the focus of this inquiry will be on the practice of

theologizing rather than dissecting dogma. What was Ramabai's self-perception in her practice of theologizing? Taking Ramabai's correspondence with Geraldine and Beale on her doctrinal difficulties in 1885 as the departure point, this article shows how Ramabai's engagement with the Christian faith was an Indian theological quest. More specifically, it was an appropriation of Christianity through the cultural lens of an Indian woman.

"Nothing would induce me to embrace Christianity," declared Ramabai before leaving India for England.¹⁹ However, five months after her arrival, she was baptised into the Anglican church. Rather than experiencing a sense of fulfilment often expressed by new converts of religions, Ramabai struggled with doubts.²⁰ She found in the new faith a plethora of "sects," "each one giving the authority of the Bible for holding a special doctrine and differing from other sects." She found this comparable to the different sects of Brahmanical Hinduism. This left her "labouring under great intellectual difficulties" and longing for "something better."²¹ Geraldine remembers that Ramabai had "difficulties about the Trinity" even before her baptism.²² Beale suggests that the root of Ramabai's struggle with Christian dogma was the continuing influence of the teachings of Brahmo Samaj (of which she was briefly a part).²³ Adhav asks rhetorically whether Ramabai's struggle with Christian dogma was because she was baptised prematurely.²⁴ Ramabai wondered, Does one receive baptism only when cleared of all doubts?²⁵

Ramabai realised that the standard parameters with which Christological passages were interpreted in the Anglican church were the Apostles' Creed and the Athanasian Creed. Though she had a fair share of problems with the former,²⁶ it was with the latter that she picked a bone of contention. Contesting the Athanasian declaration that "the Son is God," she argued that deity cannot be attributed to Christ, and so, Christ cannot be worshiped as God. She wrote, "To give the title and worship which belong only to the God of gods to a man, a created being, is to my understanding nothing but idolatry."²⁷ She also made a distinction between "those whom we regard as creatures, and the Eternal Son."²⁸ The difference between Christ and the rest of humanity is that the former "never ceases to be conscious of God's presence in him, which made him so utterly one with God in will that his human will almost disappear[ed] in the Divine, and his soul was absorbed as it were in the Divine Spirit." Thus, "Christ was one with the Father—one in will and design—because he knew the Father. We are not and cannot be one with the Father as long as our sinful nature is alive in us."²⁹

Ramabai's doctrinal position alarmed her mentors. Geraldine accused Ramabai of harbouring a dislike for the Church of England, whose people supported her coming and staying in England. She appealed to Ramabai to swallow her "pride" and accept the teachings of the Church and the clergy with humility and childlike faith.³⁰ Butler demanded that Ramabai adopt an attitude "to be taught." Ramabai felt that Butler wanted her to feel an obligation to the "Church people" to accept the Christian doctrine taught in the Church. "God forbid that I should ever do so," wrote Ramabai.³¹ "A faith professed only for gaining [the] other's confidence or love or for any other worldly gain is no faith at all. My acceptance of Christianity is altogether voluntary...."³² Thus, authoritarian attempts to rein her did not go well. While Geraldine and Butler wanted Ramabai to accept the

Christian doctrines taught by the Church without question, Ramabai was not prepared to accept any unless she was convinced of their scriptural validity. To her mentors, Ramabai came across as rebellious and deliberately stubborn.

The Critical Thinker

Lamin Sanneh spoke of the "untenable contradiction" in which new converts often find themselves: on the one hand, they have been dislodged from their own cultural system, while on the other hand, "they [find] the missionaries tolerate no compromise and insisted converts immediately and totally sever all ties with the old way of life."³³ At some level, Ramabai found herself as a classic example of such a case, whereby she felt pressured to discard her Indian (cultural) appropriation of the Christian faith. Thus, she asked, "should [I] not have a voice of my own?"³⁴ From this vantage point, Ramabai's experience has been interpreted as anti-institutionalism.³⁵ Gauri Vishvanatha suggests that in refusing to submit to the Anglican leadership, Ramabai took a political stand, a refusal of the crown of England.³⁶ Burger posits that Ramabai felt "the paternal authority" of the male clergy "as a threat to her liberty." Thus, she "developed a very personal way of understanding religion, where institutions did not constitute the important part."³⁷

An alternative to this anti-institutional narrative is to understand Ramabai's desire to have a mind of her own as that of a critical thinker. Ramabai took pains to explain that she was not rebelling against ecclesiastical leadership. She wrote to Geraldine: "Although I do not believe in the Athanasian Creed, my respect and love for the Superior and you is not a whit less than it was and I hope it shall not be less hereafter." She continued, "I tried hard to enter into your thoughts to realize your Trinitarian belief." However,

Having prayed again and again to God that your faith might take root in my heart, yet to this moment I am not able to believe it, on the contrary my faith in One Single person of God is more and more strengthened. I have now left off praying that belief in the Trinitarian faith may be given to me. I only pray for increasing light, knowledge of God's eternal truth and spiritual and bodily strength to follow it; and I am sure my voice, feeble as it is, it will be always heard by the all-merciful Father for Christ's sake.³⁸

In making a genuine effort to enter into Geraldine's thoughts, Ramabai showed that her action was not open rebellion against ecclesiastical (or secular) authority. Rather, it was her commitment to the "eternal truth" that guided her. She made a distinction between "rules laid down by uninspired men" and obedience to the word of God.³⁹

Ramabai's father, Anant Shastri Dongre, of whom she spoke fondly, had a major influence on her developing a critical mind. Dongre, a renowned Hindu pandit (a learned man) was an itinerant *puranika* (a "reader of Puranas"; these were "the popular and public teachers of religion among the Hindus"⁴⁰). He was an "orthodox reformer" (in Ramabai's words),⁴¹ acclaimed as the "Martin Luther" of modern Hinduism. He strived "to go to the root of all religious theories in order to compare them with what was practiced as the real Dharma."⁴² In particular, he found no sanction in the

Hindu scriptures against teaching the Sanskrit language (other than the Vedas) to women and the (lowest) *shudra* caste.⁴³ So, he endeavoured to educate his wife, who in turn taught her daughter, Ramabai.⁴⁴ By the time Ramabai turned twenty,⁴⁵ she was already a Sanskrit scholar and was publicly honoured by the Shastris (religious elite) of Kolkata as a Pandita and a modern incarnation of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning.⁴⁶ While in Kolkata, she came in contact with Keshab Chandra Sen and the Brahmo Samaj. This led her to question her ancestral Hindu practices, including the teaching that “women are not fit to read the Vedas.” Subsequently, she “began to study the Upanishads, and then, the Vedanta and the Veda.”⁴⁷ These studies resulted in further dissatisfaction and losing “all faith in the religion of [her] ancestors.” Later she also found Brahmoism (of the Brahmo Samaj) unsatisfactory, “For it is nothing but what a man makes for himself,” whereby “[h]e chooses and gathers whatever seems good to him from all religions known to him and prepares a sort of religion for his own use.”⁴⁸ Thus, Ramabai came from a reformist culture where one would not shy away from questioning authority on scriptural grounds.

The peculiarity of Ramabai’s position as a scholar in her former faith gave her confidence as an interpreter of sacred writings. Her mastery of the sacred language (Sanskrit) and exposure to the reformist tradition of interpretation (particularly through her father and the Brahmo Samaj) fostered a habit of critical examination. She was a religious scholar, and on embracing Christianity she did not stop functioning as one. She learned Hebrew and Greek to do her own translation of the Bible. Later, she translated the whole Bible into Marathi, becoming the first woman to do so on her own in any Indian language. Her encounter with the Christian faith was characterised by a refusal to accept claims at face value. She wrote to Beale, “all that I want you to do is to prove the deity of Christ by reasonably explained words of the Bible, and then I shall be able to believe in it—if it be so—with the help of your philosophical explanation.”⁴⁹ Similar was the tone of her encounter with Nehemiah Gore—a fascinating meeting between two prominent Indian Christians. When the latter gave her a list of Bible “passages to establish the Deity of Jesus Christ,”⁵⁰ she took pains to dissect each passage to show where she could not agree with him.⁵¹ Ramabai was unhappy with what she considered an uncritical proof-text approach to religion: “Argument in religious matter,” she wrote, “ought not to be like that of lawyers in courts of justice.” She was comfortable with unresolved tensions with regard to mysteries in religion: the “triumph” of religion, she wrote, “is not of this world.”⁵²

Ramabai did not find resolutions to her doubts, either at the altar of the Athanasian Creed or in the traditionalist interpretation of the Scripture by clergy (Butler and Gore). Furthermore, she was bemused at what she perceived to be an uncritical acceptance of traditions. She found the Wantage sisters “too sure of their ground” and not open to questioning lest they “sin against such and such commandment of God.”⁵³ Neither did she find a willing hearing from either Geraldine or Butler. Geraldine reprimanded her for her vanity.⁵⁴ Ramabai found Butler “impatient and unsympathetic,” someone “apt to be a second God,” commanding “‘Thou shalt believe and do what I say.’”⁵⁵ She confided to Beale, “I have of late often been quite disappointed in some people from whom I hoped ever to learn, and who are objects of my honour, but in them, I do not find the persons who can see my difficulties.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, in

Beale, Ramabai found someone with whom she could discuss her doubts. Beale provided her the space to express herself, to define her “conception” about various elements of Christian teachings.⁵⁷ The articles of her faith are laid out in her letters to Beale. She proposed a five-point creed outlining the basis of her acceptance and rejection of certain Christian doctrines:

1. To believe in, and worship only one God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to love Him with all my mind, soul and strength;
2. To love my neighbour as myself;
3. To believe the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah who was appointed by “His God and our God”;
4. To openly bear witness unto Christ, and to show that I reject any other faith which is not of Christ;
5. To show my love to the Saviour for the perpetual remembrance of his death and for keeping up the brotherly spirit between my fellow Christians, I am bound to be partaker of one bread and one cup with all Christians.⁵⁸

Ramabai’s strong commitment to monotheism made it difficult for her to reconcile with the idea of Christ as God. This unitarian tendency finds its parallel in Brahmoism, under whose influence she had developed a deep suspicion of polytheism. There is “only one God” (Creed 1) and Christ, a created being, was “the Messiah” appointed by “His God” (Creed 3).⁵⁹ Ramabai’s struggle with the divinity of Christ was rooted in an oriental sense of deep reverence for the divine which, in Ramabai’s words, cannot be “defiled or mixed with the lower nature of creatures.”⁶⁰ In doing so, Ramabai professed her inclination toward Arianism, the teaching associated with Arius of Alexandria who was condemned as heretical in the fourth century. Adolph Harnack has shown that Arius and his friends were motivated by “a genuine concern to defend monotheism.”⁶¹ Ramabai’s belief that Christ’s “human will almost disappears in the Divine” is also similar to that of Eutyches of Constantinople in the fourth–fifth centuries, whose position was that the human nature of Christ was overcome by the divine.

The Evangelist

The first two points in Ramabai’s creed reflect what Jesus called the greatest commandments (Matt 22:36–40): “to love Him with all my mind, soul and strength” (Creed 1) and “To love my neighbour as myself” (Creed 2). In her testimony of conversion, Ramabai emphatically stated that it was love exhibited by Christ and Christian people that drew her to the Christian faith. While on a visit to a home for “fallen women” at Fulham, England, run by the Wantage sisters, she witnessed an exhibition of the Christian teaching of “the love of Christ and compassion for suffering humanity.” This act of charity to a “class of women,” commanded by the “law of Hindu[ism]” to be “eaten by dogs” convinced her that she had found a religion that was “better than any other religion.”⁶² Having grown disillusioned with the discriminatory nature of the Brahmanical religion of her time, which she had experienced in its severity as a woman,⁶³ the message of love instantly attracted her to the Christian faith.⁶⁴ However, she was disappointed by the chronic divide among Christians contrary to Christ’s teaching of maintaining a “brotherly spirit” among fellow Christians (Creed 5). She was especially aggrieved by the uncharitable attitude of her contemporaries toward Christian

denominations other than their own. The church is “Catholic,” she wrote, not because of certain “beliefs or customs.” Rather, “Anyone who believes in Christ and His God has a right to have these [that is, Catholicity].”⁶⁵ Here she was informed by the writings of Canon Westcott, a prominent Anglican theologian of the time, who had taught that “one church” means “all [of the] Christian body.”⁶⁶ White points out that like Ramabai, Westcott, who held an incarnational approach to theology, also saw the redemptive work of Christ at work in personal religion.⁶⁷

Ramabai sought to “openly bear witness unto Christ” and rejected “any other faith which is not of Christ” (Creed 4). Growing up in a family of *puranikas* (those who officially read the sacred texts), Ramabai knew the merit of reading and hearing sacred writings. The role of a witness is like that of a *puranika*, who reads the sacred text in public in a loud voice with the correct intonation, so as to attract passers-by. As people “come and go at their choice,” the *puranika* “continues to read, paying no attention to what the hearers do or say.”⁶⁸ There was a sense of liberty and latitude in the way the *puranika* approached the audience’s response to his message. Ramabai applied a similar approach to witnessing in the organisation she founded in 1889, Sharada Sadan, which later expanded into Mukti Mission. Rachel Bodley’s introduction to Ramabai’s *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* captures it well:

[Ramabai] seeks to reach Hindu women as Hindus, to give them liberty and latitude as regards religious convictions; she would make no condition as to reading the Bible or studying Christianity; but she designs to put within their reach in reading-books and on the shelves of the school library, side by side, the Bible and the Sacred Books of the East, and for the rest earnestly pray that God will guide them to His saving truth.⁶⁹

Though Ramabai did not make it her primary purpose to proselytise the inmates of Sharada Sadan, the way she ordered her life as a Christian and the times of prayer she maintained with her daughter Manorama drew many to faith in Christ.⁷⁰

In 1891, Ramabai had an evangelical conversion experience. She reported, “I have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal Savior.”⁷¹ Burger identifies the events in 1883 (her baptism) and 1891 as Ramabai’s “outer” and “inner” conversion experiences.⁷² A third spiritual experience in Ramabai’s life is what she called “a glorious Holy Ghost revival” (1905).⁷³ These three experiences correspond to the three persons in the Trinity: embracing the “Father” as God (1883); accepting “Christ” as her personal saviour (1891); and the manifestation of the workings of the “Holy Spirit” (1905).

Nevertheless, due to a lack of closure in her writings on her doctrinal journey, it is difficult to conclude what Ramabai’s position was, in her later life, either on the Trinity or on the divinity of Christ. In general, in her writings she appears to refer to the Father as God and to Christ as Lord. Yet, this tension reflects Ramabai’s self-understanding: she neither claimed to have arrived, nor was she agreeable to all points of traditional Christian doctrine. She was on a quest. She held that one’s theological questions should not be swept under the rug because these had been discussed and resolved elsewhere. They ought, she believed, to be asked in the Indian context and resolved through an Indian lens.⁷⁴ She saw her experience as one of growing into the faith;

“obstacles” (including doubts) are part of that journey. In a letter written to Beale on September 3, 1885, she compared herself to “a baby stream,” which is yet to make its “way through the rocky part of life.” Presently, she was “stupefied by the immensity of difficulties before [her].” But she took heart in the reminder that the mighty Ganges grew into its immensity by starting as “a baby stream.” She believed her struggles were *en route* to her “growth” into “the Ganges.”⁷⁵ Just as the Ganges advances, so does one’s faith, she thought.

**Ramabai was a seeker of truth. She wrote,
“I want to find out the truth about everything,
including religion, by experiment.”**

The Indian Christian Theologian

Adhav spoke of “Ramabai’s oriental mind,” its “complexity,” and its root in “the Pantheism of [the Hindu] creed.” He suggests that the culture of “receptivity and all-comprehensiveness” in the pantheism/Hinduism in which she was reared left her “faith upset and mind harassed and perplexed” as she heard the exclusive claims of various Christian groups.⁷⁶ Here, Adhav not only quoted Geraldine but also followed her closely in assessing Ramabai as rather “vain” and susceptible to external influence—a rather Victorian conception of a liberal woman, no less shown in Geraldine’s comparison of Ramabai with a libertine/radical “Anabaptist.”⁷⁷ Ramabai disagrees. What seems like a pantheist tendency was, in reality, her drive and openness to learn.⁷⁸ Ramabai was a seeker of truth. In her autobiography, she wrote, “I want to find out the truth about everything, including religion, by experiment.”⁷⁹ Writing in the *Cheltenham Ladies College Magazine* (1886), she was critical of those who study Indian religions (Hinduism) with the intention of catching out their “errors.” Such studies do not show “fairness, a real love for truth” and neither are they “ready to acknowledge what is good and true.”⁸⁰ This statement explains her commitment to the quest for truth in her engagement with both Hinduism and Christianity. She questioned the beliefs of both and rejected the former to embrace the latter. “Other people may call me an infidel if they like,” she wrote, “but I trust Him who alone is my God, Father and Guide, and will surely show me His ways.”⁸¹ Perhaps she did have a child-like faith, one whose gaze and adoration were directed, not to “uninspired men” but toward her Heavenly Father. After reading Mark 8 during her morning devotion, she wrote, “I thought I was the blind man whom our saviour was leading out of the village. I am really blind, and resolve blindly to follow the master.”⁸²

Ramabai took pride in her Indian heritage. “I like to be called a Hindoo, for I am one,” wrote Ramabai. By “Hindoo,” she meant a cultural understanding of the term, as a synonym of “Indian.” In response to Geraldine’s condescending attitude toward Ramabai’s lifestyle, she wrote: “You may, if you like to, trace my pride in pies and puddings, butter and milk, water and rice, shoes and stockings, and even, in the enormous quantity of coals that I daily burn.... I like to.... keep all the customs of my forefathers as far as I can.”⁸³ She stood her ground and maintained her dignity. This was characteristic of Ramabai, who, in the face of all the challenges

she faced as a colonized subject, a woman, and a Christian convert, refused to be the victim. Instead, she embraced her identity as an Indian, a woman, and a Christian, and spoke her mind with dignity. In her interpretation of the Christian dogma, she often drew from the religious traditions of her ancestral faith. For instance, she appealed to the Hindu philosophical idea of *maya* (“illusion,” which allows that God can please himself to suffer without parting with his essence) to resolve confusion in the teaching of the *kenosis* (the self-emptying) of Christ.⁸⁴ She also resolved her Trinitarian puzzle by formulating a pantheistic explanation, whereby God “becomes either incarnate, or becomes One but into many persons”: “but as the air being one fills up different rooms, so the three persons being one fill three persons yet they are one.... at last these different vessels or bodies will be broken up and the whole essence of God will be again united.”⁸⁵ This formulation was admittedly drawn from “the Upamshadas” (or, the Upanishads, “the revelation of God to the Hindoos”), which teaches “that the Great Brahma which is in a minutest atom, yet is in His nature abounded, and most pure, dwelling in everything yet untouched by the lower nature, just as the lotus leaf though it grows in water, yet is not wetted by the water.”⁸⁶ That God is one and yet dwells in everything explains how the divine nature could be present in Christ.

Ramabai’s theology in her early writings was unorthodox, as rightly pointed out by her contemporaries. Her experiential theologizing (over against Catholicity) resulted in a deviation away from orthodox Christian Christology and the Trinity. Nevertheless, her experiences provide a glimpse into the workings of the mind of an educated and scholarly Indian Hindu convert to Christianity—the questions she had and the solutions she proposed. Appropriating a new faith involves rigorous contestations and resolutions with religious ideas inherited from the previous faith and what was new. The early writings of Ramabai, therefore, provide unique insights into the interface of Christianity and Hinduism in the mind of a new convert, the theological conundrums involved, the real danger of syncretism, and the promise of creative appropriation of the faith.

Conclusion

Ramabai did not write a systematic exposition of her theology. Yet, her writings—letters and essays—are dense with theological insights. Throughout her life, she fought against the monopoly, by a selected few, over truth and power. As a woman, she especially had to fight for the right to speak her mind. She was a multi-layered personality—woman, Brahmin, widow, social reformer, scholar, Indian, freedom fighter—all of which contributed toward her exposition of the Christian faith. What Ramabai brings to the table as a theologian is, first, the rich wealth of knowledge from her experience as a sincere student of two religious traditions, Hinduism and Christianity, and secondly, an approach to theology as a quest for truth. Theology is not simply a repetition of tradition, but an exposition of the sacred Scripture in life situations. Ramabai demonstrated that it takes courage to ask hard questions and that it takes faith to believe that truth will withstand the test of critical scrutiny.

Notes

1. Letters of Ramabai to Dorothy Beale, May 31, 1885 and June 30, 1885.
2. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, May 31, 1885.

3. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885. Elsewhere, in a letter written to Sister Geraldine, she wrote, “Since my baptism to this time I have not repented of my embracing Christianity....” Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Oct 15, 1885.
4. Letter of Dorothy Beale to Sister Geraldine, Apr 22, 1885.
5. Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 5, 1885. In an undated letter to Beale, Ramabai wrote “that the Childlike faith consists in not reading books what she [referring to Sister Geraldine] calls are against the teaching of the Catholic Church. And not reasoning with yourself or friends but simply to say yes, and I believe, when told to believe in the Athanasian Creed.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, undated (probably late 1885, since it complains about Sister Geraldine’s strong stand against Ramabai’s doctrinal position).
6. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885.
7. To name a few: Helen S. Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai: Her Vision, Her Mission and Triumph of Faith* (Pickering and Inglis, 1900); Nicol Macnicol, *Pandita Ramabai* (SCM, 1927); U. Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (Kali for Women, 1998); Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai: Life and Landmark Writings* (Routledge, 2016); Keith J. White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice! Pandita Ramabai, Her Life and Work, 1858–1922* (WTL, 2022).
8. White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice*, 169–76.
9. Gauri Vishvanatha, “Silencing Heresy,” in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, ed. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (Permanent Black, 2007) 249–97.
10. A. B. Shah, ed., *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai* (Maharashtra State Board for Literature and Culture, 1977).
11. Maya Burger, “Transcultural Conversion: The Life of Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922),” *AS/EA LXVII* (Apr 2013) 1155–77.
12. S. M. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai: The Oriental Revolutionary Theologian” (paper presented at the Triennial General Conference of the Church History Association of India, Bombay, Oct 19–23, 1976) 3–4.
13. Burger, “Transcultural Conversion,” 1171.
14. Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, vii.
15. Keith John White, *Pandita Ramabai, 1858–1922: A Re-evaluation of her Life and Work* (PhD diss., University of Wales, April 2003) 18.
16. White, *Let the Earth Hear Her Voice*, 10.
17. Shah, *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, 13.
18. Melissa Calaresu, Joan-Pau Rubies, and Filippo de Vivo, *Exploring Cultural History: Essays in Honour of Peter Burke* (Ashgate, 2010) 23.
19. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 6.
20. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Oct 12, 1885; Pandita Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, 10th ed. (Ramabai Mukti Mission, 1977) 26.
21. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 26–27.
22. Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 6, 1885.
23. Letter of Beale to Sister Geraldine, May 24, 1885.
24. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 5.
25. She wrote, “I wish I knew that your Church required of a person to be quite perfect in faith, doubting nothing in the Athanasian Creed, so that he had left nothing to be learnt and inquired into the Bible after his baptism. . . .” Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Oct 15, 1885.
26. She wrote that she believed in the Apostles’ Creed and was “baptised into” it. However, she had questions: How can Christ be “Conceived of the Holy Spirit” (which was a “repulsive expression to the mind which thinks of God in reverence”)? “[H]ow could Christ be called the offspring of David if he had not a human father”? “What is the difference between ‘flesh and bones’ and ‘flesh and blood’? What does it mean by ‘He descended into hell’?” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Nov 29, 1885.
27. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.
28. Letter of Beale to Ramabai, July 5, 1885.
29. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.

30. Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 5, 1885.
31. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885.
32. Letter of Ramabai to Miss Nobie, July 6, 1886.
33. Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2008) 221.
34. Ramabai reports that Butler replied to this question, “Decidedly not!” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885.
35. Shah, ed., *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, xxix–xxx.
36. Vishvanatha, “Silencing Heresy,” 272.
37. Burger’s description is similar to Ramabai’s view of the Brahmo Samaj (where one “chooses and gathers whatever seems good to him from all religions,” Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 23–24), which she rejected. Burger, “Transcultural Conversion,” 1173–4.
38. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885.
39. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885.
40. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 13.
41. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 10.
42. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 3–4.
43. Traditionally, the privilege of access to the Veda was determined by birth (*jatibrahmana*) and gender (male). Thus, only males of the Brahmin caste were allowed to study the Veda. In recent years, influenced by the modern ideas of universalism and egalitarianism, the advocacy to allow non-Brahmins and women to study the Veda has gained traction in certain circles. However, not much progress has been made in implementation. For instance, a study of Hindu Brahmanical schools in Maharashtra (India) by Borayin Larios shows that only one of the twenty-five schools studied “theoretically” admit “non-brahmanas and women.” Moreover, the idea has been vehemently rejected in the “most orthodox circles.” Borayin Larios, *Embodying the Vedas: Traditional Vedic Schools of Contemporary Maharashtra* (Open Access Hinduism, 2017) 46–47.
44. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 10–12.
45. By then Ramabai had already lost both her parents and elder sister, and was left only with her elder brother, who also passed away in 1880.
46. Shah, ed., *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, 10.
47. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 22. “Vedanta” means “the end of the Vedas.” Initially, it was used to refer to the Upanishads, a collection of philosophical-religious texts of Hinduism of the late Vedic period (1200–400 BC). It was later widened to include philosophical thoughts developed out of the Upanishads. Satishchandra Chatterjee and Dheerendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (University of Calcutta, 1948) 395.
48. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 23–24.
49. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.
50. The list of Bible passages were as follows: John 12: 41 (referred to Isa 6:1–6); John 20:28; Acts 20:28; Phil 2:5–8; Col 1:16–17; Rev 5:13.
51. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, undated.
52. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, “Summer vacation,” 1885.
53. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, “Summer vacation,” 1885.
54. Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 5, 1885.
55. Butler told Ramabai, “You ought humbly to accept the Church’s teaching, you are not cleverer than the Church, &c., &c.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885. Ramabai wrote to Beale, “To tell you the truth, I am rather afraid to speak to Canon Butler. And not only to him but to all those who think all that they advance is true, and that, if they could not make others agree with them, they are of course ready to think that they spoke to dishonest ‘hearts.’” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, “Summer vacation,” 1885.
56. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, June 21, 1885.
57. Beale wrote, “I want to get at your conception, as I have tried to make you see mine.” Letter of Beale to Ramabai, June 27, 1885. Again, “I should like you to define your thought of God—your conception.” Letter of Beale to Ramabai, July 5, 1885. Ramabai wrote, “I am not writing (whenever I write on religious matters) to the Lady Principal, and to her authority, but to Miss Beale, who if she thinks like myself she has not yet quite found the truth but is searching after truth, and is a fellow-labourer with me.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, “Summer vacation,” 1885.
58. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, June 21, 1885.
59. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885.
60. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.
61. Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. IV, trans. Neil Buchanan (Dover, 1900) 16.
62. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 25–26.
63. Ramabai’s *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (Fleming H. Revell, 1901), first published in 1887, provides a vivid picture of an Indian woman’s struggle with Hinduism.
64. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 26.
65. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Sept 22, 1885.
66. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Nov 7, 1885.
67. White, *Pandita Ramabai*, 116.
68. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 13–14.
69. Quoted in Shah, ed., *Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai*, xxi.
70. Letter of Sister Eleanor to Sister Geraldine, Aug 19, 1889.
71. Ramabai reports, “I came to know after eight years from the time of my baptism that I had found the Christian religion, which was good enough for me: but I had not found Christ, Who is the Life of the religion, and ‘the Light of every man that cometh into the world.’” Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 27–28.
72. Burger, “Transcultural Conversion,” 1167.
73. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 42.
74. Ramabai also believed that as one called to be a missionary in India, she must ask the difficult questions else she will not be able to “answer [her] adversaries.” Therefore, she insisted, “I must be thoroughly instructed.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, undated.
75. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 3, 1885.
76. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 4–5.
77. Adhav, “Pandita Ramabai,” 5; Letter of Sister Geraldine to Ramabai, Oct 5, 1885.
78. The following statement reflects her determination to know the truth: “But this shall not stop me from studying the Bible and proving this doctrine of the deity of Christ, if it be true or untrue.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885. Again she wrote, “But I must ever continue to search the Scriptures and never stop until I find the lost piece of silver—either in this world or the next.” Letter of Ramabai to Beale, May 31, 1885.
79. Ramabai, *A Testimony*, 35.
80. Ramabai, “Indian Religion,” *Cheltenham Ladies College Magazine* XIII (Spring 1886) 108.
81. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Aug 15, 1885.
82. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 3, 1885.
83. Letter of Ramabai to Sister Geraldine, Oct 15, 1885.
84. She was addressing the question, how does one reconcile in Christ, “omniscience and ignorance, omnipotence and subjection,” which “are opposite to each other as the light and darkness are”? Letter of Ramabai to Beale, June 30, 1885.
85. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, June 30, 1885.
86. Letter of Ramabai to Beale, Sept 1, 1885.



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Christian Baptism as the Gender-Inclusive Covenant Sign

Jennifer Anne Cox

The OT sign of inclusion in the covenant community is circumcision. This is a male-only rite. This male-only covenant sign has consequences in the OT for women pertaining to how they are included within the privileges and responsibilities of the covenant. On the other hand, the NT sign of covenant community inclusion is baptism, which is administered to females and males alike. Circumcision is now, for Christians, a spiritual circumcision of the heart which is as applicable to females as it is to males. This circumcision is the result of the atoning work of Christ. The distinction between the covenant signs suggests that the new covenant provides greater participation for women in the covenant community than was the case for Israelite women in the OT. The contrast between male-only circumcision and female-inclusive baptism is not directly addressed in the NT. However, that is not to say that the pieces are not available to us. This article attempts to put the pieces together and to explore the significance of female-inclusive baptism for the body of Christ.

Old Testament Circumcision and Its Male-Only Nature

From the third millennium BC, circumcision was a common practice in the ancient Near East, of which Israel was a part. However, the way circumcision was practiced in Israel was different from the nations surrounding it, one distinction being the Israelite practice of circumcising eight-day-old male infants rather than at puberty or before marriage.¹ The Jewish practice of circumcising male infants began with God's command to Abraham in Gen 17.² God said to Abraham:

As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant. (Gen 17:9–14 NRSV)

Circumcision served the positive purpose of acting as a visual reminder of God's covenant promises to Abraham, reminding both God and each circumcised man of the promise of many offspring for Abraham.³ It connected future generations to the covenant promises and served as a means of continuing the covenant throughout generations (Gen 17:10–12).⁴ Thus each generation was required to exercise faith by being circumcised, or else suffer being cut off from the covenant.⁵

It also served a negative purpose, for without it, inclusion within the covenant was denied. Meredith Kline argues that as part of a covenant based on the format of a suzerain-vassal treaty, circumcision was the “knife rite.” It symbolised the curse of being cut off from the covenant community, both for the individual and his descendants.⁶ Thus, no one could be included within the covenant without being circumcised (Gen 17:10, 14).⁷ Gentiles could be included in the covenant, but it was not possible to convert to Judaism without being circumcised. “Uncircumcision” was a term of reproach (Judg 14:3, 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6, 17:26, 36, 31:4; 1 Chr 10:4; Isa 52:1). Those who were uncircumcised sat outside the covenant and were therefore considered pagan and unclean (Ezek 44:7, 9).⁸

Physical circumcision was considered insufficient because the heart must become circumcised so that a man can love God (Deut 10:16–17, 30:6–7) and obey his commandments (Lev 26:40–41; Jer 9:24–26).⁹ Yet later in rabbinic Judaism, bodily circumcision was considered as the most important commandment, the central tenet of Judaism. Circumcision is still considered by many Jews as the essence of what it means to be Jewish. It functions as a boundary marker, without which a Jew is no longer a Jew.¹⁰

The elephant in the room is that circumcision applies to males only.¹¹ What about Israelite women?

How Are Jewish Women Included in the Covenant?

Since circumcision is such a significant boundary marker, indicating that a male is a Jew and having the power to convert a Gentile into a Jew, what makes a woman a Jew?¹² Are women part of the covenant also? Are they equal citizens of the covenant community with men? Rabbinic Judaism would respond that women are Jews but not the equals of men. The Babylonian Talmud affirms that circumcision is a means of differentiating males from females. According to this view, the ideal Jew is male, not female, because the male Jew has the mark of the covenant visible in his flesh.¹³ For the rabbis of antiquity, to be Jewish without qualification, one must be male.¹⁴ This ancient rabbinic view, however, is not necessarily a biblical position.

There is some biblical support for the inclusion of women into the covenant in the Gen 17 narrative. After Abraham was given circumcision as the covenant sign (Gen 17:9–14), God spoke to Abraham about Sarah (Gen 17:15–16). Like Abraham, she was given a new name (thus Sarai became Sarah). However, she had no covenant obligations, only a blessing.¹⁵ Sarah was not required to take on a physical marker, even though she had a part within the covenant, namely, being the mother of Abraham's offspring.¹⁶ We should note that God told Abraham of Sarah's name change, rather than telling her directly (see Gen 18:9ff).¹⁷ So, although Gen 17 seems to include Sarah within the covenant as the mother of God's

covenant people, Sarah received no visible or tangible sign of the covenant in contradistinction to Abraham and his male descendants.

It can be biblically argued that women are part of the covenant through the headship of father or husband. Three OT examples spell out this principle. Members of the priest's family may eat the sacred offerings. Thus, while a woman cannot be a priest, as long as she lives in her father's house, she may eat the sacred offerings. If she marries a man who is not a priest, she is no longer able to eat these. However, if she is widowed or divorced, and childless, she may return to her father's house and once again eat them (Lev 22:10–13). The second example is regarding annulling of vows. When a woman makes a vow (Num 30), her father (if she is unmarried) or husband has the right to annul the vow under certain conditions. The third concerns inheritance of land within Israel (Num 27:1–11). The five daughters of Zelophehad had no brothers, and Moses declared that they could inherit their father's property. But to make sure that the ancestral land did not transfer to another tribe, the property was to be given to a male relative within the tribe if the woman married outside the tribe (Num 36:1–12). By implication "a woman is part of her husband's domain," and her property becomes his.¹⁸

According to this logic, a woman's place in Israelite society explains why women are not circumcised. The male is circumcised as the sign of the covenant. A woman's status is dependent on the man with whom she dwells. Consequently, a woman is part of the covenant community through her association with father or husband.¹⁹

There have been attempts at softening the significance of the male-only nature of this covenant sign. One suggestion is that circumcision need only be on the man because he and his wife become one flesh (Gen 2:24). This renders it unnecessary to circumcise the woman. Another idea is that the real significance of circumcision is found in the circumcised heart, mind and lips (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; Jer 4:4, 9:26; Ezek 44:7).²⁰ Even Calvin affirmed that circumcision did not grant to males an exclusive possession of the covenant and its promises, because females also share in the covenant.²¹ But the male-only nature of circumcision remains.

Circumcision and Female Authority in the Old Testament

There is no argument that ancient Israelite society was patriarchal and patrilineal. The OT is written from a male perspective. Women lived their lives under the authority of men: single women under a father's authority and married women under a husband's authority.²² There is evidence that women were viewed as the property of the man under whose authority they lived (Exod 21:22; Deut 22:28–29).²³ This notwithstanding, much of the OT views women positively.

In several narrative texts, the portrayal of women is distinct from the prevailing worldview of the rest of the ancient Near East. The creation narratives state that both men and women are created in the image of God and imply the necessary partnership of women and men. Other texts affirm the value of women. For example, the Hebrew midwives are acknowledged as brave (Exod 1:15–21) and women are involved in the construction of the tabernacle (Exod 35:22, 26, 29). Indeed, the Decalogue commands that fathers and mothers be honoured (Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16).²⁴

The majority of laws in the Pentateuch are directed inclusively at men, women, and children. Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy frequently refer to the entire community of Israel. Females were as accountable before God as were males.

However, there were real restrictions on the authority roles women could exercise in the OT. Ancient Israel had three main leadership roles: king, priest, and prophet. All monarchs of Israel were male.²⁵ Priests were male descendants of Aaron (Exod 28:1–4). However, prophets were sometimes female. Isaiah's wife is explicitly called a "prophet" (Isa 8:1–4). Other female prophets named in the Scriptures include Deborah (Judg 4–5), Huldah (2 Kgs 22:14), and Miriam (Exod 15:20).²⁶ The Bible does not state that these restrictions were due to the lack of circumcision, but the need to be male to fulfil two out of three leadership roles allows this association.

The majority of laws in the Pentateuch are directed inclusively at men, women, and children. Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy frequently refer to the entire community of Israel.²⁷ Females were as accountable before God as were males. This is evidenced by the mention of specific sins of women and the punishments they would face (Amos 4:1; Isa 3:16–4:1, 32:9–14; Jer 7:18, 44:17; Ezek 8:14, 13:17).²⁸ A woman could make vows, including the Nazirite vow (Num 6:2), even though her father (if she was unmarried) or husband had the right to annul the vow under certain conditions (Num 30:3–16).²⁹

However, some laws particularly impacted women. A man could divorce a woman (Deut 24:1), but there is no law allowing a woman to divorce her husband. Women could not inherit property, except in the case where a father had no sons (Num 27:1–11). If a husband suspected his wife of being unfaithful, he could take her to the priest to test if he was correct (Num 5:11–31).³⁰ No reciprocal test was provided if a woman suspected her husband.

At least one law in particular reads as if men alone are obliged to obey it. "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the Lord GOD" (Exod 23:17 NRSV; see also Deut 16:16). Women were not restricted by this law because they were able to attend the festivals, even encouraged to do so (Deut 16:14).³¹ The Talmud interpreted the exclusion of women from this command as the result of their lack of circumcision,³² though the Bible does not make this connection. Sadly, the rabbis' exemption of women from "positive time-bound commandments"³³ has been used by some to disrespect the significance of women within Judaism.³⁴

Indeed, throughout much of history, Judaism has relegated women to second place. Judaism at the time of Jesus had digressed from the biblical ideal. Women were excluded from many of the religious observances of Judaism. Although males were schooled in the faith from a young age and required in synagogue services, women were not.³⁵ Shaye Cohen observes that classical Judaism

regarded women as differently Jewish from males because of their lack of circumcision. This was the reason for their lower status.³⁶

In summary: the Bible does not exclude women from the old covenant; they were genuine participatory members of the Israelite community.³⁷ However, without a covenant sign in the flesh, they were only indirectly included in the covenant through the males under whose authority they resided—through the father or husband. The subsequent way in which the rabbis interpreted the OT law and the male-only nature of circumcision as covenant sign resulted in exclusion of women from much of Judaism.

The New Testament View of Circumcision

The gospel introduces a new mark of the covenant. The rite by which a person enters the covenant community is no longer circumcision, but baptism.³⁸

Even so, the NT addresses the church with reference to the practice of circumcision in several epistles. In Galatians, the issue was the church trying to be justified by works rather than faith in Christ (Gal 3:11).³⁹ The Judaizers preached that circumcision was necessary for complete Christian sanctification (Gal 3:3) and receipt of the Abrahamic blessing. Paul argued that it is through faith in Christ, not through the physical ancestry of Abraham that a person is made an heir of God (Gal 3:29). Circumcision is not relevant. It is not the requisite for inclusion within the people of God. Circumcision was but temporary until the promises of God were fulfilled in Christ.⁴⁰

In Romans, Paul argued against circumcision as a guarantee of salvation (Rom 2:17–27). The new age has dawned, and circumcision of the heart is accomplished by the Holy Spirit. Gentiles who believe in Christ are spiritually circumcised. Abraham was circumcised to be the father of the circumcised (Rom 4:9–12). But before being circumcised he was righteous by faith, and therefore the father of those who have faith. Now that Christ has appeared, a new era is here, one in which the true seed of Abraham are not the circumcised but, rather, believers in Christ.⁴¹

What is implied in Rom 2:25–29 is made explicit in Phil 3:3: “For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh” (NRSV).⁴² The covenant community of God is no longer made up of those who are physically circumcised, but instead includes all who have faith in Jesus Christ.

In Colossians, the discussion centres on circumcision through Christ. “In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ” (Col 2:11 NRSV). The Christian has been circumcised in Christ, not by human hands but by God. Physical circumcision is but a shadow of the true circumcision, which is of the heart, making genuine heart-obedience to God possible.⁴³ “Putting off the body of the flesh” is a violent metaphor for the death of Christ. The means by which a Christian receives the benefits of “the circumcision of Christ” is through faith and baptism.⁴⁴ “Christ’s cross is the true circumcision for believers.”⁴⁵

While Paul applies his understanding of circumcision and the new covenant to the inclusion of Gentiles in the church, he does not

explicitly apply it to women. This does not mean that there is no application to women. But before looking at the consequences of this new understanding of circumcision, it is necessary to consider the covenant sign that replaces circumcision, namely, baptism.

A significant difference, however, is that women as well as men are baptized as a mark of membership of the covenant community. Unlike circumcision, baptism is a gender-inclusive sign.

Baptism as the Gender-Inclusive New Covenant Sign

Christian baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the new covenant.⁴⁶ When the Christian is baptized, he or she invokes the name of Christ, receives forgiveness of sins, is given new life, and is baptized in and sealed by the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷ By baptism believers become partakers of Christ’s death (Rom 6:3–4) and are united with him so that they receive his blessings (Gal 3:27).⁴⁸ Baptism is a sign of regeneration by the Holy Spirit through the death and resurrection of Christ, and thus represents the person’s connection to Christ and his covenant of grace.⁴⁹

Calvin argued that Christ is the foundation of both circumcision and baptism. On the basis of Col 2:11–12, he avers that circumcision and baptism are both signs of the same reality.⁵⁰ When a person is baptized, she or he becomes part of the body of Christ through Christ’s already-completed work of redemption.⁵¹ Baptism is “a sacred and serious act of incorporation into the visible community of faith.”⁵² It is “the initiation rite into the Christian church.”⁵³ Baptism is thus analogous to circumcision in its function as a mark of inclusion in the covenant people.

A significant difference, however, is that women as well as men are baptized as a mark of membership of the covenant community. Unlike circumcision, baptism is a gender-inclusive sign. This is evidenced in various biblical passages and by the theology of at least one church father.

First, passages about baptism are inclusive of females and males. Whole households were baptized. The Gentile household of Cornelius believed the gospel preached by Peter and were all baptized (Acts 10:44–48). The Philippian jailer and his household were baptized by Paul and Silas (Acts 16:33). In Corinth, Crispus and his household believed in Christ and were baptized (Acts 18:8). Paul baptized the household of Stephanus (1 Cor 1:16). A household most likely contained at least one woman. Some passages are explicit about women being baptized. Philip preached the gospel in Samaria and his converts were “baptized, both men and women” (Acts 8:12 NRSV). Lydia was evangelised by Paul in Philippi and “she and her household were baptized” (Acts 16:15 NRSV).

Further biblical passages demonstrate that women could become believers in Christ independent of their fathers or husbands. In the Roman colony of Philippi, Paul looked for a place of prayer near a river outside the city (Acts 16:12–13). In the absence of a synagogue

in Philippi,⁵⁴ Paul spoke only to the women gathered there. One in particular, Lydia, was converted and took Paul and his companions to her house (Acts 16:13–15). Lydia was not subject to questions of whether her husband (if she had one) approved of her conversion. Her status as a believer was her own decision.⁵⁵

Paul's discussion of marriage in 1 Cor 7 is another plain indication that women can be part of the new covenant community without being under the authority of father or husband. Women can serve God without being married (1 Cor 7:8–9). A Christian woman may be married to an unbelieving spouse, yet her faith sanctifies both her husband and the children of the union (1 Cor 7:12–14). Even if it were not unusual for Greek women to practice a religion different from that of their husbands,⁵⁶ this passage makes it clear that the Christian woman was not dependent on her husband for her status as a believer.

Women in the ancient world were, for all practical purposes, under the authority of men. That did not prevent women from becoming Christians contrary to the dictates of their husbands. 1 Peter 3:1 addressed the situation of a Christian woman married to a non-Christian husband. Peter advised women to uphold the normal patterns of society such as obedience to husbands. This may not have been the Christian ideal in marriage but it was necessary as a witness to Christ in a society hostile to the gospel.⁵⁷

The church father Cyprian—as part of his efforts to demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith over Judaism—also observed the gender-inclusive nature of baptism as the rite of inclusion into the Christian community of faith. He observed, “That sign [circumcision] does not profit women, but everyone is signed with the sign of the Lord.”⁵⁸ Effectively his argument was “that Christian signs of communal inclusion—be they faith, baptism, circumcision of the heart, or a combination of all three—are superior to Jewish circumcision, since they include women as well as men.”⁵⁹

The biblical passages above and the theology of Cyprian provide positive indication that a woman can be a Christian without reference to a man. Unlike the Jewish women in the OT, who were not circumcised and thus part of the covenant vicariously through father or husband, the Christian woman is baptized into Christ without reference to any man. This is a radical difference between old covenant and new covenant.

The change from a male-only covenant sign in the OT to a gender-inclusive covenant sign in the NT prompts the question of whether God was sexist under the old covenant. If so, he was within his rights as the sovereign Lord of Creation (cf. Rom 9:19–21). However, it is possible that God's apparent sexism in the OT functions in a similar way to the exclusivity of Israel as God's people in the OT compared to the openness of the gospel to Gentiles in the NT (Eph 3:6; Col 1:27). The former makes the latter all the more wonderful. If this is the case, the radical shift is even more significant because the NT denotes an expansion of status and roles for women which must be taken seriously.

Implications of Baptism as the Gender-Inclusive Rite

The implications of baptism as the gender-inclusive rite, compared to circumcision as a male-only rite of entrance to the covenant community, are not spelled out explicitly in the NT. Nonetheless, if a

woman's inclusion in Christ is symbolised by baptism, which is equally administered to males and females, then we would expect a change in the status of women in the NT over against the OT. A theology of gender-inclusiveness may be built based on the existing general passages and hints found regarding the leadership of women in the early church.

Female status before God is always because of Christ (Gal 3:28; cf. Col 3:11), and the observance of baptism is a way of signifying this. Being in Christ makes a person what they are in the church. It is not a matter of gender. Aside from the clearly stated distinction in marriage (Eph 5:25–33) and a couple of much-debated passages (1 Tim 2:11–15; 1 Cor 14:34–35), the NT does not differentiate between men and women. Rather, the overwhelming majority of passages are addressed to both men and women without distinction.

There is reason to believe that the status of women under the new covenant, through the new inclusive sacrament of baptism, means that both women and men can take on leadership roles. Before considering concrete examples of female leaders in the NT, some theological pointers to female leadership will be considered.

Women as well as men are baptized in the Holy Spirit. In Acts, all Christian women are filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:17).⁶⁰ One result of the baptism in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13) is the Holy Spirit's distribution of gifts to the church, a distribution which Paul never ties to gender (1 Cor 12:7–11) but only to the confession of Christ as Lord (1 Cor 12:3). This being the case, we would expect that leadership gifts could be provided to women as well as men, the most obvious being that of prophet (Acts 2:17; see also Acts 21:9).⁶¹

As concerns accountability, Craig Keener observes, “In Luke's view women and men are equally morally responsible (Acts 5:1–11).”⁶² In addition, Luke makes explicit that both men and women are included among those who are persecuted for the faith (Acts 8:3, 9:2, 22:4).⁶³ If women are able to suffer and die for the faith,⁶² it is reasonable to suppose that Christian women have the same level of accountability before God for defending the faith as do Christian men.

The NT mentions women in leadership roles in several places. Several women are designated as patrons. Tabitha supported widows (Acts 9:36), and Mary was the patron of a Jerusalem house church (Acts 12:12). Lydia acted as a patron to Paul and those with him (Acts 16:15)⁶⁵ and was the leader of the first church in Philippi (Acts 16:12–15, 40).⁶⁶

In Judaism, teaching the Torah was almost exclusively a male role. However, in Acts, Priscilla and Aquila worked together and ministered together. In particular, they both taught Apollos (Acts 18:26).⁶⁷ Priscilla's name appears before her husband's (Acts 18:18; see also Acts 18:26; Rom 16:3; 2 Tim 4:19), possibly suggesting that she had a more powerful and influential ministry than did he. Clearly, Priscilla's teaching enabled Apollos to make a great contribution to the kingdom of God (Acts 18:27–28).⁶⁸ Both Priscilla and Aquila were called *synergous* (“coworkers,” CEB, NIV) by Paul, and they risked their lives for him (Rom 16:3–4). Paul designated seven women as his co-labourers (Rom 16:3, 6, 7, 12; Phil 4:2–3).⁶⁹ Priscilla, Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2–3), Phoebe, Tryphaena and Tryphosa (Rom 16:12), and Junia (Rom 16:7).⁷⁰ Phoebe was likely the courier who brought the letter to the Romans from Paul and thus explained it to them (Rom 16:1–

2). She is called a “deacon [*diakonos*] of the church at Cenchreae” (NRSV). In Pauline usage, *diakonos* generally applies to someone who ministers the word of God. She is also called “patron of many” (NRSV) and consequently would have been honoured as the one whose house was the meeting place for the church.⁷¹

The qualifications for an apostle⁷² were fulfilled by certain female disciples (Luke 8:1–3, 23:49, 55–56, 24:1–10).⁷³ A female apostle was mentioned by Paul: “Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was” (Rom 16:7 NRSV). There are no existing examples of a corresponding masculine name, “Junias.” Thus, Junia was a woman. “Prominent among the apostles” is a better translation than “outstanding in the eyes of the apostles.”⁷⁴

The theological passages above and the narrative passages regarding women leaders stand in unity. As persons who carry the new covenant sign of baptism, Christian women can take on leadership positions in the church.

Conclusion

The new covenant sign of baptism is more inclusive of women within the covenant community than the old covenant male-only sign of circumcision was. A woman is no longer part of the covenant community only through her husband or father, but can believe in Christ independently of a man. Women, by virtue of being marked by the gender-inclusive covenant sign of baptism, are not lesser than men. This fact should result in rethinking and restructuring the position of women within the church, particularly at the local church level. It is one thing to speak of equality before God and another to actualise this in practical terms.

Notes

1. P.R. Williamson, “Circumcision,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. David W. Baker and T. Desmond Alexander (InterVarsity, 2003), 122.
2. Thomas Thomas Robert Schreiner, “Circumcision: An Entrée Into ‘Newness’ in Pauline Thought” (Ph.D. Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Theology, 1983), 18.
3. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” 21–22.; Williamson, “Circumcision,” 123. Wenham argues that the primary act of remembrance was on the part of the circumcised male rather than on the part of God (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, Word Biblical Commentary, (Zondervan, 2000), 23–24.).
4. Williamson, “Circumcision,” 122–23.
5. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” 22.
6. Meredith Kline, cited in B. Witherington, *Troubled Waters: The Real New Testament Theology of Baptism* (Baylor University Press, 2007) 11–12. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=PjNOVR2jOtYC>.
7. Williamson, “Circumcision,” 123.
8. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” 52–53, 55.
9. Williamson, “Circumcision,” 125.
10. Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 10–12.
11. To be clear, it is not being suggested that any female should be circumcised.
12. Shaye J.D. Cohen, “Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?,” *Gender & History* 9/3 (1997) 560.
13. M. Adryael Tong, “‘Given as a Sign’: Circumcision and Bodily Discourse in Late Antique Judaism and Christianity” (Fordham

- University, 2019) 39, 133.
14. Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*, 25–26.
15. Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary, (Cambridge University, 2009) 168–73.
16. J. Sailhamer, *Genesis* (Zondervan Academic, 2017), <https://perlego.com/book/558326/genesis-pdf>.
17. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (Eerdmans, 1990), <https://perlego.com/book/2015730/the-book-of-genesis-chapters-117-pdf>.
18. David A. Bernat, “Circumcision and ‘Orlah in the Priestly Torah” (Brandeis University, 2002) 108–10.
19. Bernat, “Circumcision and ‘Orlah in the Priestly Torah,” 110.
20. John Goldingay, “The Significance of Circumcision,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25/88 (2000) 4; Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*.
21. John Calvin, *Genesis* (Crossway, 2001), <https://perlego.com/book/1414866/genesis-pdf>.
22. S. J. Dille, “Women and Female Imagery,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (InterVarsity, 2012) 847.
23. M. J. Evans, “Women,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. David W. Baker and T. Desmond Alexander (InterVarsity, 2003) 898.
24. Evans, “Women,” 899, 900–03.
25. The sole exception to this rule is Athaliah, queen of Judah after the death of Ahaziah (2 Kgs 11). Some believe she was acting as queen-regent on behalf of Ahaziah’s infant son Joash, but, in line with the biblical account, Josephus plainly states that she was a usurper bent on destroying the Davidic royal line (*Ant.* 9.140–142) (Joseph Scales and Cat Quine, “Athaliah and Alexandra: Gender and Queenship in Josephus,” *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 11/2 (2020) 233–50).
26. Dille, “Women and Female Imagery,” 847.
27. Evans, “Women,” 899.
28. Dille, “Women and Female Imagery,” 849–50.
29. David A. Bernat, “Circumcision and ‘Orlah in the Priestly Torah,” 109.
30. Evans, “Women,” 898–99.
31. Evans, “Women,” 899. That women were not required to travel to the sanctuary for the three feasts may have benefited those women whose childbearing and childrearing responsibilities would have hindered such a journey.
32. Cohen, “Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised?” 572–73.
33. That is, any commandment that must be performed at a particular time and cannot be done later.
34. Anat Israeli, “Jewish Women and Positive Time-Bound Commandments: Reconsidering the Rabbinic Texts,” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal* 12/1 (2015) 2.
35. C. C. Kroeger, “Women in Greco-Roman World and Judaism,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (InterVarsity, 2000) 1279.
36. Shaye J. D. Cohen, *Why Aren’t Jewish Women Circumcised? Gender and Covenant in Judaism* (University of California, 2005) 111, <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/551662/130>.
37. Evans, “Women,” 903.
38. Schreiner, “Circumcision.” Abstract.
39. Although I have read Gal 3:10 in a typical conservative fashion in line with the Magisterial Reformers, the “New Perspective on Paul” would read this verse differently. For example, J. D. G. Dunn sees the issue in Galatians as covenantal nomism rather than works righteousness (James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus, Paul, and the Law: Studies in Mark and Galatians* (Westminster John Knox, 1990) 242). Regardless of whether one takes a traditional or some version of the New Perspective, circumcision is still not a requisite for inclusion under the new covenant.
40. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” 139–82.
41. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” 188–228.
42. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” 246.
43. Schreiner, “Circumcision,” 283.
44. David E Garland, *Colossians and Philemon* (Zondervan, 1998) 2:6–15.
45. Thomas R Schreiner, “Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite

- for Believers,” ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (B&H Academic, 2006).
46. “It is difficult to know when the Jews began to practice proselyte baptism as an initiation rite for Gentile converts to Judaism, so we cannot assume it was a precursor of John’s and Christian baptism” (Andreas J Köstenberger, “Baptism in the Gospels,” in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* [2006] 11).
 47. Francois Bovon, “Baptism in the Ancient Church,” *Sewanee Theological Review* 42/4 (1999) 435.
 48. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. Two (SCM, 1960 [1559]) IV.xv.5–6. The Bible makes strong statements regarding Christian baptism, which should not be vacated. Because of the completed work of Christ, baptism is first a gracious work of God before it is the action of an individual. However, baptismal regeneration is not a doctrine which the Bible teaches. In other words, as significant as Christian baptism is, it does not bring about salvation.
 49. Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (Wipf and Stock, 2006), <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/880386>.
 50. Calvin, *Institutes*, Two., IV.xvi.3, 11.
 51. Bovon, “Baptism in the Ancient Church,” 436.
 52. Timothy George, “Foreword,” ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (B&H Academic, 2006).
 53. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, “Introduction,” ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (B&H Academic, 2006).
 54. Chaido Koukouli-Chrysantaki, “Colonia Iulia Augusta Philippensis,” in *Philippi at the Time of Paul and after His Death*, ed. Charalambos Bakirtzis and Helmut Koester (Wipf and Stock, 2009) 34.
 55. I am not saying that salvation is dependent on the human will over against God’s election. I am merely emphasising the capacity of women to enter the Christian faith independently of a man.
 56. Kroeger, “Women in Greco-Roman World and Judaism,” 1279.
 57. C. S. Keener, “Woman and Man,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (InterVarsity, 1997) 1207–08.
 58. *To Quirinus* 1.1.8
 59. Tong, “‘Given as a Sign,’” 150.
 60. Keener, “Woman and Man,” 1207.
 61. There is not room to explore what the roles of priest and king look like under the new covenant. However, I contend that in Christ, who is prophet, priest, and king as mediator of the new covenant, women are as fit for these roles as men.
 62. Keener, “Woman and Man,” 1206.
 63. C. C. Kroeger, “Women in the Early Church,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (InterVarsity, 1997), 1216.
 64. Female Jewish martyrs do exist. Second Maccabees mentions the martyrdom of several women. Two women who defied the Greeks and circumcised their sons were killed by being thrown off a wall (2 Maccabees 6:10). Another mother was put to death after each of her seven sons was tortured and killed for refusing to eat pork and after she encouraged them to choose death over disobedience to God (2 Maccabees 7) (Susan Haber, “Living and Dying for the Law: The Mother-Martyrs of 2 Maccabees,” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal* 4/1 (2006)).
 65. Keener, “Woman and Man,” 1206.
 66. Kroeger, “Women in the Early Church,” 1217.
 67. Keener, “Woman and Man,” 1207.
 68. Kroeger, “Women in the Early Church,” 1217–18.
 69. Kroeger, “Women in the Early Church,” 1219.
 70. C. G. Kruse, “Ministry,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (InterVarsity, 1993), 603.
 71. C. S. Keener, “Man and Woman,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (InterVarsity, 1993), 589.
 72. An apostle must be someone who was with Jesus during his ministry and who was a witness to his resurrection (Acts 1:21–22).
 73. Kroeger, “Women in the Early Church,” 1216.
 74. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16, Volume 38B* (Zondervan Academic, 2018) 16:3–16.



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Born into God's Kingdom

A sermon on John 3:1–21 originally preached on May 21, 2023 at First Reformed Church in Oak Harbor, WA

Juliann Bullock

I grew up living in the city. Not always a huge city, but always a city. And when you're in the city, as you probably know, it's never *really* dark. Even in the middle of the night, with all your lights off and no moon, there are always little spots of light. It wasn't until I moved to Papua New Guinea and spent time out in remote villages that I learned what true darkness was. I'm sure those of you who live outside of town are very familiar with this kind of darkness. When it's truly dark, when there is no light anywhere, it doesn't matter if your eyes are open or closed. It all looks the same, and it all looks like nothing.

When it is this dark, the tiniest little flicker of light anywhere is immediately noticeable. When a light appears in a truly dark place it's natural, almost instinctive, for everyone to immediately look that way. Every head, every eye, turns towards the light without even thinking about it. It would take effort not to look.

John's audience, living in a time before the invention of electricity, would have been very familiar with truly dark darkness. In John chapter one, he uses the imagery of a light coming into a dark place to describe Jesus, God coming to live as a human being in our world.¹ The book of John really is a series of stories about what happened when various people saw that light. I think everybody who encountered Jesus noticed him. You can't help noticing a light in the darkness. But after noticing him, everybody had a choice. They could walk towards that light and embrace it for what it was, even if it hurt their eyes a little. Or, they could shut their eyes and turn the other way. Most of the stories in the book of John are about people wrestling with what to do with that light. Would they recognize who Jesus was, and if they did, would they accept him on his terms? Or, would they try to make him fit into a mold of who they thought he would be or who they thought he should be, or who they wanted him to be?

In John 2, we see that Mary recognized and accepted who Jesus was, even before his first public miracle. But later in that chapter the Pharisees refused to accept him, even after the miracle he performed. They didn't like that miraculous sign; they wanted another one, a different one, a better one, or perhaps one that would fit better with their ideas of who the Messiah should be.

But in John 3, we learn that one of those Pharisees, Nicodemus, came to find Jesus alone, at night, for a private chat. Remember, John opened the book with this imagery of light in the darkness, so it's significant now that he specifically tells us that Nicodemus comes at night. I think we're supposed to connect those dots and see this as Nicodemus's encounter with the light of Jesus in the

John uses the imagery of a light coming into a dark place to describe Jesus, God coming to live as a human being in our world.

middle of the darkness. What will Nicodemus do with that light? Will he receive it, or turn away? The fact that he came at night to talk to Jesus privately also means that his interest was probably sincere.

In cultures like this, where

honor and shame are really important realities, asking questions in public can easily shame the person being asked. If they don't know the answer, or their answer seems unacceptable, they'll be shamed in front of everyone. So, if you want to challenge or humiliate someone, you're definitely going to question them publicly. The Pharisees did a lot of that with Jesus. But Nicodemus came privately, suggesting that he was genuinely interested in hearing what Jesus had to say and that his questions were sincere.² He truly wanted to be Jesus's student, and he addresses him as a teacher. In verse 2 he says, "Rabbi," (which means teacher), "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him" (NIV). Nicodemus sees the light, he accepts the miracles Jesus has performed, and he recognizes that this light has come from God. He's coming to Jesus as a student coming to a teacher; he's using the student/teacher relationship to describe the relationship he wants to have with Jesus. This is one of many ways we could describe our participation in the kingdom of God. We can think of ourselves as Jesus's students, which is what the word "disciple" actually means. We could also think of ourselves as citizens of God's kingdom, or pilgrims on a journey to God's kingdom, or soldiers fighting for God's kingdom, or laborers working to build God's kingdom. These are legitimate metaphors, used throughout the Bible to describe our participation in God's kingdom. They're not wrong.

But in this conversation, when Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as a teacher from God and approaches him as a student, Jesus does not speak in terms of a teacher/student relationship. He doesn't use any of the other metaphors we mentioned either. He goes straight to a very different metaphor and says: "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3 NIV). In that moment, in the conversation, Jesus is avoiding all those other possible metaphors for relationship in God's kingdom and inviting Nicodemus into a relationship of rebirth. It's as if Nicodemus says: "I see you, Jesus. I see your light in the darkness. I recognize who you are. You're a teacher from God." And Jesus says: "No, Nicodemus, you don't truly see me as I want to be seen by you. In order to see the kingdom of God, to come into the light and see who I really am and who I really want to be to you, you need to be reborn."

Before birth we're in darkness; we can't see anything. It's only after birth that we are in the light, and we can see. We have to be *born* into God's kingdom to truly see who Jesus is; we have to let the

Holy Spirit give birth to us. John 3:6 says that “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (NIV). Or, in the New Living Translation: “Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.”

In “Christianese” we talk so often about being born again that the phrase doesn’t surprise us, but I think we need to take a minute to recognize how shocking it is. For us, after 2000 years of doing theology about spiritual rebirth, it’s easy for us to laugh at Nicodemus and say, “Silly Nicodemus, he thought Jesus was talking about physical birth.” But what else was he supposed to think? It was a weird thing to say. Throughout the book of John, Jesus gets in the habit of making these statements that sound ridiculous if you take them literally. Consider his claim in John 2 that he could rebuild a temple in three days. Here in John 3, it seems like an absurd thing to say that you have to be born again to see the kingdom of God.

Now, why would Jesus use the metaphor of birth? Why do we need to be *born* into God’s kingdom? Why is it not enough to enter it as a student, or as a citizen, pilgrim, soldier, or laborer? Well, think about this. Within those other metaphors, with those other identities, we would have a fair amount of independence. Those other identities all describe things that we can *do* within God’s kingdom, and we could potentially stop doing them at some point and decide to do something else instead. I could decide that I wanted to be somebody else’s student for a while, or emigrate and become a citizen of a different kingdom, or take a break from my pilgrimage, or stop fighting in the war, or work somewhere else. I could walk away from any of those other relationships and continue to live my life. It wouldn’t kill me. I would still be my same independent self.

It is not the same for a baby being born. If we are being born into the kingdom of God, it’s not something we do. It has to do with who we are, or rather, *whose* we are. We cannot walk away from that relationship and hope to live. To be born into God’s kingdom, to become God’s tiny, unborn, or newborn baby means acknowledging a relationship of complete and utter dependence on God, recognizing that we depend on God for our very existence.

You see, being a part of God’s kingdom isn’t like a day job, where we go off and do a bunch of useful things for God and then take some time off for ourselves. No, being part of God’s kingdom means entering into a state of being in a constant connection with God. The reality of God’s kingdom on earth was ushered in by the Son of God’s own birth into a relationship of trustful dependence on a human mother. So, it’s only fitting that we enter that kingdom in the same way, through birth into a relationship of complete and continual connection of trust in, and dependence on, God as our eternal mother.³

This same idea is communicated in the other Gospels. Luke 18 tells about people bringing their little children and babies to Jesus. The word Luke uses, in verse 15, specifically means a baby, an infant. And Jesus, likely holding one of those little babies, says in 18:16–17: “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (NIV). We have to become young, small and tiny, in order to be born, to see, or to receive the kingdom of God.

If we’re too big we won’t fit, because the way that leads to life is narrow. Kristin Wright-Bettner put it this way. She writes:

Jesus said that in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, we have to change. We need to do something differently than we’ve been doing. And that something different involves us becoming little again. I used to think, subconsciously, that Jesus was prescribing a law. If we don’t obey and become like little children, then God is going to actively prevent us from entering the Kingdom. But now I think perhaps Jesus was simply stating a fact—describing, not prescribing. Not becoming little, in itself, is the thing that keeps us from entering the Kingdom. We just won’t fit. The birth canal is a narrow passage, after all. Small is the gate, narrow is the path that leads to life.⁴ To fit through, you have to be little.⁵

If this blows your mind, you’re in good company. Nicodemus said, “How can this be?”⁶ And within this narrative, that’s the last we hear from him. That question is full of astonishment and bewilderment. How can this be? Did Nicodemus get it? Did he accept the light? Was he willing to receive the relationship Jesus offered him on Jesus’s terms? Was he willing to be birthed through that narrow place of dependence on God?

Well, we don’t really know, but the more important question is, do we get it? We each have to ask ourselves, am I willing to be born into the light of God’s kingdom, and accept the relationship of dependence on God that that requires? Jesus said in John 3:19–21:

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (NIV)

Are we willing to be born into the light? Do we recognize Jesus as he is and accept a relationship with him on this level? Are we willing to become smaller, more dependent on God, and receive our identity as a newborn baby in God’s kingdom, even if we’ve been members of that kingdom for decades? And if we are, how do we do that? How can this be? What does that look like? As we think about how to apply this and what it means for each of us today, there are two things I think we need to take away with us.

First, I’m *not* going to say to you, “Get your act together and hurry up and be born already.” That’s not how birth works. We are not the ones giving birth in this metaphor, the Holy Spirit is, so the burden is not on us. We are the ones being born. This is why Jesus talks about *receiving* the kingdom of God rather than earning our way into it. Let it happen. Receive your identity as God’s baby, even if you’ve belonged to God your whole life. And if you feel inadequate, or unworthy of this identity, good. You are. We all are. That’s part of what it means to get smaller. To realize how very needy we are and receive God’s love in the middle of our messy neediness. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (that is, “those who are poor and realize their need for” God), “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”⁷

I suspect that our birth into God's kingdom is not a one-time event, but an on-going process that will take our whole life on this earth. Yes, we are already members of God's kingdom when we recognize the light and acknowledge who Jesus is: God who came to live with us as a human, who gave his life for our spiritual birth and returned from death for our spiritual life. But that acknowledgement is only the beginning of our birth, and the process will continue until the full realization of God's kingdom when Jesus comes back. So that's the first take away.

And second, as you learn to fully accept that identity of dependence, know that you are very, very loved. Moms and dads, you know how deeply loved that little baby is, even before they're born. That's how much God loves you. John 3:17 says that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (NIV). God's not waiting for you to mess up so you can be condemned. No, the Holy Spirit is actively working to safely birth you into God's kingdom. You are loved by God not because of anything you do, but simply because of who you are—God's child. We don't love our babies because of any particular qualities or capabilities they have. We don't love them because of what they can do for us or how good they are. We love them just because they're ours! Honestly, most newborn babies are at least a little bit funny-looking for a while, and they can't give anything back to us but love. Participation in God's kingdom is not something we earn or accomplish, and I think that's why Jesus used this metaphor instead of any others.

To be a good student, we would have to learn enough and know enough. To be a good citizen we would have to keep the laws well enough. To be a good pilgrim we would have to travel far enough. To be a good soldier we would have to fight hard enough or skillfully enough, and, to be a good laborer we would have to get enough work done. But to be a good baby we just have to be. When you are born into the kingdom of God, you are fully loved, just as you

are. Your identity and status within God's kingdom do not depend on any qualities or capabilities that you bring or develop. They rest entirely on your identity as God's deeply loved child. Sure, growing and developing is good and healthy. We want to do that. But it doesn't make God love us any more or less, or change our status in the kingdom of God. God doesn't love you because you're such a great person. God loves you because you're God's person, even when you're not a great person.

So receive the kingdom of God like an infant. Just say yes to Jesus again today, and come into the light. Let yourself be born into your identity as God's deeply loved child.

Notes

1. John 1:4–5.
2. E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (InterVarsity, 2012) 135, Kindle Location 1879.
3. Juliann Bullock, *Mothers as the Image of God* (Resource Publications, 2022) 83–84.
4. Matt 7:14.
5. Quoted in Bullock, *Mothers as the Image of God*, 88–89.
6. John 3:9 (NIV).
7. Matt 5:3 (NIV).



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Pentecostal Women Leaders: The Interplay of Egalitarian Theology, Feminism, and Pentecostalism

Anna Morgan

Most Pentecostal movements today are welcoming women leaders and preachers in their embrace of egalitarian theology (even if not always in practical application). The pursuit of women's equality is typically an objective of those who lean left on the values spectrum. Pentecostals tend to be socially conservative. Why, then, would Pentecostals embrace egalitarian theology?

Taking the intersection of the Pentecostal movement and women's movements in North America as a case, this essay traces how egalitarian theology developed into a clearly organized set of ideas and practices. We shall see how, over the past two hundred years, social changes produced by women's movements have propelled the acceptance of women church leaders and changed the landscape of Western church leadership. While egalitarian theology is not a product of secular feminism, feminism created an environment where egalitarian theological reflection could take root and flourish. This has not happened in a linear fashion, however. Pentecostals, for example, found themselves entwined with feminism in its earliest days, but this has been a push-pull relationship over time.

The Early Church

While the formalizing of egalitarian theology occurred in recent history, egalitarian practices and informal reflection are much older. Since the early church, women have been leading and ministering. The Apostle Paul mentions Priscilla, Phoebe, and Junia as women leaders with formal leadership roles (Rom 16). Historians Leanne Dzubinski and Anneke Stasson have well described the diversity of leadership roles held by women in the first several centuries of the church. Women led as early church patrons, missionaries, apostles, widows, martyrs, deacons, scholars, virgins, and desert mothers.¹ Christian art from the first and second centuries depicts women teaching, baptizing, administering the Lord's Supper, leading public prayer, and caring for physical needs.²

However, the church has not always recognized this female ministry. As Christianity gained ground in society, women began to be excluded from the historical record in deference to cultural attitudes about appropriate behavior for women. Men wrote history and theology from their male perspective. Some of the greatest thinkers of the ancient world had low regard for women. Aristotle, for example, referred to them as "deformed men."³ Women's active work in ministry leadership nonetheless continued throughout Christian history, quietly and often hidden, with women's roles shifting over time as Christianity contextualized itself to each generation. Despite the stories of women leaders often being buried under the abundance of stories of male leadership, Dzubinski and Stasson recognize that "in every era, women have occupied positions of leadership and have spread the faith through word and deed."⁴ The present debate about women's church roles that has taken center stage marginalizes the significant ways God has long

been using Christian women leaders around the world.⁵ The hidden nature of this history still negatively impacts women church leaders today since it has established false norms for women's roles.⁶

Not only was the history of female leadership in the church not well documented, but it was also not well explained. In their theological reflections, early Christian writers largely focused on establishing core doctrines and church practices. In these early years, a written theology of women leading was not developed. Without a clearly defined theology to guide future generations, the egalitarian practices of the early church gave way to the prevailing patriarchal culture as the church became accepted by mainstream society. Rather than the church impacting cultural norms around gender roles, culture impacted the church's practices. As a result, subsequent generations interpreted Paul's writings about the role of women in the church differently than the early church did. It took many centuries before a theology of mutuality began to emerge in the church.

The Church's Increasing Patriarchy

As the church gained social prominence, women's roles increasingly reflected the values of the surrounding patriarchal culture. Rather than transforming cultures to view Christ (rather than a husband) as the head of every home, male supremacy was reinforced. For example, the Victorian era's Cult of Domesticity (1820–1860) influenced early nineteenth-century America and persists today within complementarian ideals. The Cult of Domesticity fortified old ideas about the inferiority of women and their unsuitability to lead or to work outside of the home. It appealed to women by claiming that women were inherently pure and pious and should not taint themselves with the worldliness of business or governing.⁷ Women belonged in private spheres, as wives and mothers, and were naturally submissive and gentle.⁸

In the wake of the Cult of Domesticity, however, came new thought about women's roles in society, particularly for White middle- and upper-class American women.⁹ This groundswell of ideas developed into the feminist movement, which has had enormous impact on Western societies. Because of the women's movement, women gained voting rights, property rights, and emerged from the home into the workplace. Birth control and access to education vastly changed the cultural landscape for women. Women now hold executive leadership roles and the highest government offices. Currently, for example, the United States has its first woman vice-president. This sea change has transformed the cultural waters of Western Christianity.

While women have been influential in the church for its entire history, a clearly articulated and documented practical theology of women in ministry leadership began to emerge only in the nineteenth century. It impacted, for example, official

denominational policies around the ordination of women. This theological reflection came as women across all spheres of life began to reconsider their social roles.

Egalitarian Theology and Early Feminism

Traditionally, scholars divide the feminist movement into three waves (and sometimes add a current fourth wave). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the first wave of feminism (1848–1920) made significant strides in women’s suffrage, education, property rights, and the abolition of slavery.¹⁰ In the swirl of first-wave feminism ideas, women began to theologize about their experiences and their calling. Many of these early egalitarian theologians were also social reformers.

We can trace the development of a clearly articulated and recorded theology of women ministers from Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874). Palmer was an American female Methodist theologian and preacher who developed a theology of the “priesthood” or “prophethood of all believers.” This recognized that men and women alike ministered through the power of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated through the practice of spiritual gifts in healing, prophesy, word of knowledge, preaching, and teaching.¹¹ The Holy Spirit’s gifting validated a woman’s leadership in Christian ministry. She wrote *The Promise of the Father* (1859), a defense of women’s preaching.

These ideas did not end with Palmer, however. Catherine Booth (1829–1890) continued to develop this theology. Booth grew up in a Victorian English home that embraced the ideology of the Cult of Domesticity. However, because of her childhood illness, Booth developed a keen interest in theology and preaching. After marrying, she wrote *Female Ministry*, theologically defending Palmer’s preaching ministry. Booth began to preach and founded the Salvation Army in partnership with her husband, William Booth.¹²

Another key egalitarian theologian was Katharine Bushnell (1855–1946), a Methodist missionary and feminist social activist. Bushnell had a high respect for the Bible as inspired and infallible but argued that translators had misrepresented the Bible because of their patriarchal lens. She taught that female emancipation was at the heart of the gospel message. Bushnell wrote *God’s Word to Women* (1916), a carefully researched Bible study advocating the liberation of women. She believed feminism and Christianity were so deeply connected they could not be separated.¹³

In these scattered egalitarian theological seeds of the Methodist holiness movement, God began to stir hearts and minds in a new Christian revival, Pentecostalism. The organizational structures that emerged from the Pentecostal revivals of the early twentieth century became some of the fastest-growing egalitarian movements today. Pentecostals focused on the experiential nature of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This brand-new movement had the frontier culture of pioneers, initially without strong organizational structures or well-defined theologies. In contrast to the mainline denominational restrictions which limited women leading and teaching, women were preaching at the forefront of the early Pentecostal movements.¹⁴

The Pentecostal movement and the first-wave feminist movement emerged in the same era. Both were breaks from the status

quo (whether in society or in the church) where women pioneered new public identities. The Pentecostal movement in these early days was largely considered to be fringe, fanatical, and doctrinally flawed.¹⁵ Some overlap existed between feminism and Pentecostalism. Christabel Pankhurst was a first-wave feminist who practiced civil disobedience and spent time in jail before becoming a Pentecostal pioneer in 1922, preaching both about the Holy Spirit and women’s suffrage.¹⁶

Women were active in official ministry leadership roles in the Azusa Street Mission, a flashpoint for the Pentecostal revival. In 1907, the General Assembly of the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) officially recognized the leadership role of women in the early church. In 1908, they recognized women deaconesses, and in 1909, licensed women to preach.¹⁷ The Assemblies of God denomination also began developing an egalitarian theology in this era. Beginning in 2010, its General Presbytery published a position paper affirming women’s role as preachers.¹⁸

The theology that developed in the Assemblies of God was not directly a response to women’s rights but was framed in a hermeneutic of trust in the Bible as inerrant.¹⁹ Jesse Hoover delineates three key facets of the theology underpinning the Assemblies of God’s position toward women in ministry in this era: that the Holy Spirit’s calling was the most important validation of any minister; that the Holy Spirit’s giftedness was proof of this calling; and that the biblical theology of Joel 2, as fulfilled in Acts 2, affirmed that “your daughters will prophesy.”²⁰ Pentecostals embraced Phoebe Palmer’s “priesthood of all believers” theology. These revivalists believed that in the last days, the Spirit would pour out on all flesh, men and women, and the proof of this was in Spirit-giftedness. They did not wait for someone to ordain them into ministry. Instead, “Recognition usually followed, rather than preceded, active ministry.”²¹ This was extraordinary in an era when women could not even open a bank account on their own, or vote.²²

While the Church of God used the established Pentecostal theology to support women preaching, it barred women from full ordination until 2000.²³ The Assemblies of God, however, continued developing their theology over its early decades. The denomination began with a limit placed on women’s church leadership roles based on 1 Tim 2:11–15. This changed in 1920, and women began to be ordained as assistant pastors. This policy shift was undergirded by a new interpretation of Psalm 68:11, a recognition that women bear equal responsibility for preaching the gospel, and an argument that 1 Cor 14:34–35 was addressing a particular problem rather than establishing a blanket prohibition on women preaching.²⁴ J. N. Hoover argued in 1932 that the Apostle Paul commending Pheobe was an affirmation of women leading in the early church, not just preaching. This theology influenced the Assemblies of God’s 1935 decision to fully ordain women as both evangelists (prophetic ministry) and pastors (priestly ministry).²⁵

In the United States, women like Maria Woodworth-Etter (1844–1924) and Aimee Semple McPherson (1890–1944) pastored large churches and were influential preachers and ministers. They maintained their feminine identity in an era when female leadership was socially unacceptable.²⁶ Semple McPherson founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, a Pentecostal denomination that today boasts over 90,000 churches around the

globe. Sarah Jane Lancaster (1858–1934), a Methodist lay minister, began the Pentecostal movement in Australia. She planted a church and founded the Australian Assemblies of God. By 1930, twenty of the thirty-seven Pentecostal churches planted in Australia were pastored by women.²⁷ In 1914, a full one-third of the American Assemblies of God ministers, and two-thirds of its missionaries, were women.²⁸ Egalitarian theology was not just a set of ideas but was being lived out in the church.

This early synergy would not last, however. As Pentecostalism became more mainstream through the charismatic movement in the decades to come, second-wave feminism did not find the same footing within this Christian community.

The Pentecostal Movement and Second-Wave Feminism

Second-wave feminism, emerging in the middle of the twentieth century and propelled by Betty Friedan, focused on women's liberation from the home and on women's equality.²⁹ By this time, Pentecostals had found greater mainstream acceptance in Christian society. Ministers like Pastor Kathryn Kuhlman helped transition the Pentecostal movement into respectable Christianity through a "charismatic renewal" which crossed denominational boundaries. Kuhlman pastored a church, preached on radio and television, led a large organization, and had a powerful healing ministry. Despite this prominence, Kuhlman distanced herself from feminist ideology and did not offer a theological defense for her ministry.³⁰ Christians isolated themselves from cultural shifts that moved women out of the home and into the workforce, subscribing to a "theology of submission." Women were expected to submit to their husbands, who submit to the church, which submits to Christ. Pentecostals were frequently wary of the word "feminist," an attitude that continues today.³¹

As a result of this evangelical rejection of second-wave feminism, women became increasingly uncommon as leaders within Pentecostal churches, even while continuing to preach and prophesy.³² In the early church, when Christianity gained acceptance in wider society, women lost ground in Christianity as Christians adopted society's patriarchal values. Likewise, as Pentecostalism became part of accepted mainstream evangelical Christianity, Pentecostal women lost status in the home and lost ministry leadership opportunities.

Pentecostal denominations have not formally differentiated between gender roles in ministry.³³ However, as Pentecostal denominations institutionalized and formalized doctrine and structures, becoming more mainstream and enculturated, they became less focused on pneumatic manifestations. Because manifestations of Spirit-giftedness were the ultimate validation of a woman's ministry, women's equality in leadership was not sustained. As the Assemblies of God in America sought wider acceptance within the evangelical community in the 1960s, it retreated from its earlier practice of empowering women. More pointedly, it distanced itself from the secular feminist movement, which was perceived as an assault on family values.³⁴

In tune with American culture, younger generations of Pentecostals have become increasingly mainstream evangelical in expression, less interested in the manifestation of the pneumatic gifts, and less

accepting of female leadership.³⁵ "The very success of the Assemblies has paradoxically made it more difficult for charisma to flow—particularly should the Spirit choose to rest on women."³⁶ As the movement grew, so did the expectation that women should submit to men. Women were widely accepted as preachers, teachers, and prophets as they were gifted by the Spirit, but expected to submit to male headship both at home and in church governance.³⁷ Another way to understand this, according to Charles Barfoot and Gerald Sheppard, is that as the Pentecostal movement institutionalized, the function of leaders shifted from being prophetic (pastoring and preaching) to priestly, with a focus on leadership and administration. In this transition, female leadership involvement diminished.³⁸ As a result of these cultural dynamics, female ordination diminished in the Assemblies of God.

During second-wave feminism, Pentecostals were not the only movements taking a fresh look at women's leadership. In 1948, the World Council of Churches set up an ecumenical commission to study the life and work of women in churches. Of the sixteen denominations that participated in the study, only a few of the mainline denominations were ordaining women: namely, the American Baptists, Evangelicals, Disciples of Christ, Christian Churches, and African Methodists. The Presbyterians, Lutherans, Reformed Church of America, and Protestant Episcopalians were not. In most of these denominations, however, the reasons for excluding women from denominational and church leadership had less to do with clearly defined theology and more to do with tradition around women's roles.³⁹ The mainline denominations focused less on developing an egalitarian theology based on inerrancy, and more on issues of women's rights.

The World Council of Churches revisited the question in 1963 with a new ecumenical study. The council realized that a church's theology of women in leadership was the most significant factor impacting whether a woman led in her church, and that it was rapidly becoming a divisive issue. They concluded:

The range of the discussion and the urgency of the problem is something new in Christian history; it has been occasioned by social and cultural movements, although the solution of the problem requires theological decision. Social and cultural movements have their proper place as a challenge to translate Christian doctrine into possible new forms of church life and church order. It is true that the danger must be avoided of accommodating Christian truth to the current ideology, but we must also say that God may use secular movements for showing his will to us.⁴⁰

The study leaders concluded that codifying ideas into a well-formed theology was important for Spirit-led, well-reasoned reflection and practice around women in ministry. They believed that the fact that this reflection was prompted by the social movement of feminism was not necessarily a signal of cultural syncretism, but perhaps of God's sovereign winds of change blowing across society. They began this reflection with two key points: God has called all believers, both men and women, to bear witness to Jesus, and God created both male and female alike in his image. Scripture seeming to limit female leadership should be interpreted through the original historic-cultural context.⁴¹ As a result of this egalitarian theological work, thinking in mainline denominations began to shift.

Egalitarian Theology and Third-Wave Feminism

Third-wave feminism began in the 1990s, with a generation that grew up in the shadow of second-wave feminism. Women's equality had been normalized. Third-wave feminism had a greater focus on femininity, personal empowerment, diversity, and social justice issues.⁴² In sync with third-wave feminism, the Assemblies of God released its first position paper defending women in ministry, with a clearly articulated egalitarian theology based on biblical inerrancy. This document addressed translation errors that formerly rendered Phoebe's role as that of "servant" instead of "minister" (Rom 16:1) and presented the female apostle Junia as the male Junias (Rom 16:7). The document blamed these errors on patriarchal bias on the part of translators who could not conceive of women holding these leadership roles.⁴³

Today, many Pentecostals are refocused on empowering female leadership in an effort to remain culturally relevant. In 2000, the Church of God International Assemblies agreed to ordain women as "ministers" as a practical concession for women in ministry contexts that require full ordination, such as military chaplaincy.⁴⁴ This was not a theologically driven shift but was a response to the societal changes that came in the wake of second-wave feminism. The openness for women to undertake chaplaincy was not a military initiative. Rather, it was the Church of God's willingness to fully endorse women in ministry.

An uneasy duality has emerged. Feminism is still a dirty word in many Christian circles, and leaders who self-identify as feminists can find themselves marginalized in Pentecostal circles. Women in church seem to associate feminism with disloyalty or neglect of family, abortion rights, and hatred or resentment of men.⁴⁵

However, due to sixty years of changing Western culture, gender equality is an underlying expectation in marriages and in churches, despite giving lip service to the idea of wives submitting to husbands.⁴⁶ Cheryl Catford claims that this duality is a result of Pentecostalism's lack of a clear egalitarian hermeneutic. This makes it vulnerable to the theology of complementarian Christianity.⁴⁷ Frederick Ware disagrees, arguing that Pentecostal egalitarian theology has been clear and well-established through the work of early theologians like Phoebe Palmer. He terms this duality "ecclesial pragmatism," wherein church policy decisions are influenced by social and practical pressures rather than by theological considerations. He criticizes this methodology, insisting that Pentecostals and Charismatics should ordain and empower women, not because of adopting feminism-driven social change, but because Pentecostal ecclesial praxis should be in alignment with its already well-developed egalitarian theology.⁴⁸

We have seen a resurgence in female leadership in the Western Church, despite resistance from younger leaders influenced by neo-Reformed celebrity pastors like Mark Driscoll and John Piper.⁴⁹ In 1987, just 13.8 percent of credentialed ministers in the US Assemblies of God were women. This increased to 17.4 percent in 2003. In 2002, the numbers of female credentialed ministers in the Australian Assemblies of God (renamed Australian Christian Churches) were just 16.8 percent. By 2007, that number had risen to 26.4 percent.⁵⁰

Female church leaders today find themselves caught between the traditional negative attitudes (within Christian culture) toward second-wave feminism, the power structures of their movements, and the expectations for personal empowerment held by young Christian women who grew up in the age of third-wave feminism. Bobbie Houston, founding co-pastor of Hillsong Church, straddled this tension. While she referred to feminism as "misguided," encouraging women to prioritize their husbands and children, she also held the second most powerful role within Hillsong's organization for decades and advocated for global female empowerment.⁵¹ Miller notes this paradox:

The dissonance between the message of empowerment preached by female leaders and the restrictions that others, and they, place on their power seems striking to an outsider. That female Pentecostal leaders do not see a paradox in the fact that they may pastor a church and act as role models for other women while submitting to their husbands' authority, makes this phenomenon even more fascinating. Broad social changes to women's roles within the family and wider society have not transformed their roles within their churches.⁵²

Pentecostal movements continue to wrestle with this dissonance, as do other denominations. Pentecostals trend toward political conservatism, although they do not go as far right as many Baptists do. Methodists and Presbyterians tend to be more politically moderate. Episcopalians tend to be more politically liberal than many other denominations.⁵³ To what extent do these cultural trends impact women's leadership in local churches? Probably significantly, but within Pentecostalism, egalitarian theology straddles an awkward tension between its political affiliations with the waves of feminist movements and its own theological history with respect to women in church leadership.

In the past forty years, many well-respected theologians have continued to write and reflect about a theology of mutuality, bringing fresh insights into reading Scripture and into writing church history. Some bring an overtly feminist theological perspective into this discussion, looking to dismantle patriarchy and gain power for women. Others focus on mutuality, which looks to both empower women into full partnership with men, and to secure the mutual flourishing of both sexes. In the 1980s and 90s, work by theologians like Catherine Clark Kroeger and Stanley Grenz built on this. In the past twenty years, Gordon Fee, Lucy Peppiatt, Kevin Giles, Scot McKnight, and Craig Keener are just a few of the important voices writing about a theology of mutuality, amidst a large body of expanding egalitarian theological work. Organizations like CBE International and other denominational efforts are bringing these ideas into wider conversations.

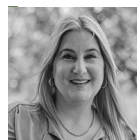
Conclusion

Egalitarian theology empowers women into their God-given ministry giftedness. It places men and women in mutual partnership in the home and in the church. Egalitarian movements have intersected with feminism at various points. As Christianity contextualized itself within the feminist movements' influence in Western culture, egalitarian theology emerged, affirming what God was doing through female ministry. In Pentecostalism, this meant that as God poured out

his Spirit on men and women, an egalitarian preaching and prophetic ministry flourished. Women were on the front lines of leading this revival. However, as Pentecostalism became mainstream in the mid-twentieth century, this female participation waned. This regression has been reversing more recently in the wake of the influence—on Western society—of three waves of feminism. What has emerged today is an egalitarian missiological approach that empowers women into their God-gifted leadership calling and sets men and women leaders in partnership with each other. In addition, the past forty years have produced a large body of formal theological reflection on a theology of mutuality, in other words, egalitarian theology.

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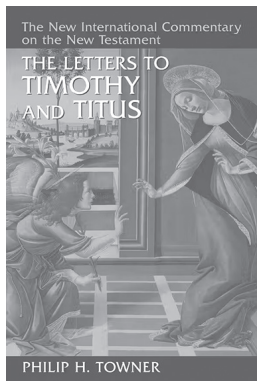
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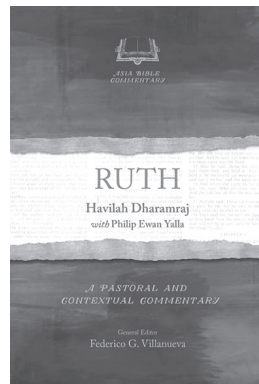
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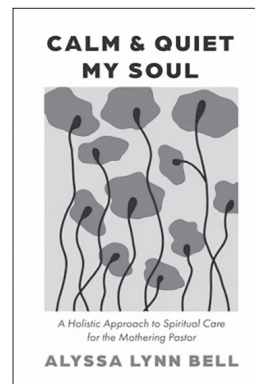
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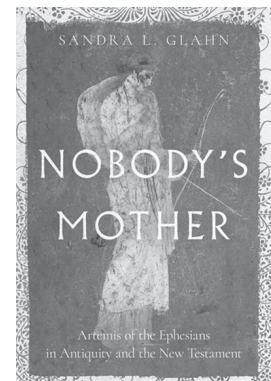
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