

**Jenny Dagers**

## **On Playing with the Boys: An Argument for Feminist Theological Engagement with ‘Radical Orthodox’ Presentation of Christian Doctrine<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

I am grateful to the Salamanca conference organisers for their invitation to give my paper, “The Heart of the Cross: A Meeting Place for Feminist Theology and Christian Orthodoxy” in a plenary session. The paper was based on an already-published essay entitled “Girls and Boys Come Out to Play: Feminist Theology and Radical Orthodoxy in Ludic Encounter”,<sup>2</sup> which provides the full text of the argument that I summarised for the conference plenary. Given that this piece is already published, the invitation to contribute my paper to this conference edition of the journal gives me the opportunity, instead, to respond to feedback from a number of conference participants. This feedback suggested that my paper would have been more accessible if I had contextualised the “Radical Orthodoxy” movement, which is largely unknown outside Anglo-American theology, and if I had given a clearer rationale for my project. I appreciate both the feedback given and the chance to address it here.

### **“Radical Orthodoxy”**

The prime mover in the movement named radical orthodoxy is the Anglican philosophical theologian, John Milbank, who first indicated its parameters in his book, *Theology and Social Theory*.<sup>3</sup> Radical Orthodoxy emerged from

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<sup>1</sup> The paper takes the opportunity of providing a rationale for, and discussing the implications of, a conference paper given at the Salamanca conference in August 2011 based on an already-published chapter, “Girls and Boys Come Out to Play: Feminist Theology and Radical Orthodoxy in Ludic Encounter”, see note 2.

<sup>2</sup> In: Lisa Isherwood and Marco Zlomisnik (eds.), *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy* (Wipf & Stock, forthcoming 2012).

<sup>3</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Blackwell: Oxford 1990).

the University of Cambridge during the 1990s, with the collection of essays by that name, edited by Milbank, together with Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock who was a doctoral student supervised by Milbank at that time.<sup>4</sup> While Ward has become, in his own right, a leading figure in post-modern theology, thus exceeding the label “radical orthodox”, the subsequent work of Milbank and Pickstock retains its strong association with this organising idea. Milbank’s term at Duke University facilitated his close collaboration with Stanley Hauerwas, which has led to a broadening of the movement to include American theologians, notably Daniel Bell and Stephen Long.<sup>5</sup> Useful sources for readers new to this area of theology are *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader*, and a critical introduction written by Steven Shakespeare.<sup>6</sup>

Radical orthodoxy is a sophisticated intervention in the longstanding western tradition of philosophical theology, which uses postmodern philosophy as a tool to challenge modernist secularism and to reconnect with the pre-modern theological tradition. Particular attention is given to Aquinas, and the movement is situated in the wake of Barth’s recall of theology to trinitarian orthodoxy and to a language of revelation in the event of Jesus as the Word of God incarnate. Other major theological currents, including liberation theology, are criticised for orienting themselves in relation to the secular, rather than making Christian tradition foundational. The movement has been criticised as elitist, both in the theological formation required to read radical orthodox writings, and in its thoroughly Eurocentric concern with opening a new chapter in the longstanding disputes between Christianity and Enlightenment thinking.

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<sup>4</sup> John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (Routledge: London 1999).

<sup>5</sup> See Daniel Bell, *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2001); Stephen Long, *Divine Economy: Theology and the Market* (Routledge: London 2000).

<sup>6</sup> John Milbank and Simon Oliver (eds.), *The Radical Orthodoxy Reader* (Routledge: London 2009). The reader includes two essays by Ward, three by Pickstock and nine by Milbank, plus two short pieces by other authors, and interpretative introductions by Oliver, based on work of the initial three editors where attention to Milbank predominates; Steven Shakespeare, *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (SPCK: London 2007) considers the authors of essays contributed to the inaugural collection, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, and the work of Long and Bell. Shakespeare makes a clear exposition of key themes within radical orthodoxy and major criticisms of it.

## **Feminist Theology and Radical Orthodoxy**

I opened my essay and my conference paper with the following paragraph:

It was bound to happen. When, in radical orthodoxy's inaugural text, John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank sounded a critical blast against liberation theology, the scene was set for a showdown between radical orthodoxy and feminist liberation theology. Twenty years later, the dust has settled: for many theologians and their broader constituencies, a clear demarcation between two kinds of theology has been reinforced in this noisy confrontation. On the one hand, conservative theologies reassert Christian doctrinal orthodoxy over against a secularised and multifaith world; they claim the Christian Church as vehicle of salvation, while ignoring the havoc wrought in the exercise of ecclesial power throughout the long history of western Christianity. On the other hand, feminist and other liberation theologies make incisive critique of the exercise of power in the name of Christianity, and its consequences in the suffering of the poor and oppressed; further, they claim salvation as liberation to lie at the heart of Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

The collection of essays edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marion Grau, *Interpreting the Postmodern*, together with contributions to Lisa Isherwood's forthcoming collection, *The Poverty of Radical Orthodoxy*, mount incisive and effective critiques of radical orthodoxy from a feminist liberation perspective.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, in my essay and conference paper I took a different approach, by setting up conversations between feminist theologians who engage postmodern philosophy for feminist purposes – Catherine Keller and Mayra Rivera – with, respectively, John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock. To summarise my conclusions without repeating the argument here, I propose the heart of the cross as meeting point for a horizontal feminist imaginary and the vertical imaginary reinstated by radical orthodoxy.

Keller and Rivera represent feminist relational concern with issues of justice and God-infused human community; attention to embodiment grounds an incarnational understanding of the horizontal dimension that becomes present through human solidarities, and is capable of resisting and undoing *kyriarchy*. Milbank and Pickstock, in contrast, contribute to the reinstatement

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<sup>7</sup> See Jenny Dagers, "Girls and Boys", 1; Milbank's critique of liberation theology is set out in his essay in *Theology and Social Theory* entitled, "Founding the Supernatural: Political and Liberation Theology in the Context of Modern Catholic Thought".

<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether & Marion Grau (eds.), *Interpreting the Postmodern: Responses to "Radical Orthodoxy"* (T&T Clark: London 2006).

and restatement of trinitarian theology, wherein the economy of salvation is always located within a vertical imaginary in relation to the immanent trinity: the divine-human relation that is seen, with its implications for and within human communal life, is always in relation to the unseen. One further aspect of my argument is to attempt to remove Pickstock from Milbank's shadow, in order to read her work as more open to human embodiment than her critics usually allow.

To insist on this vertical-horizontal intersection between radical orthodoxy and feminist theology is to represent traditional Christian theological understanding of revelation as divine intervention, disrupting the human ordering of our worldly affairs. Radical orthodoxy insists that Christian doctrine is informed by divine revelation, while offering no clear analysis of the effects of the will to power in the development of doctrine. In contrast, liberation theology, including feminist liberation theology, with its insistence that salvation be conceived as liberation from the effects of *kyriarchal* economic, social and political power relations, has radically transformed theological understanding of human affairs, by insisting that these should be organised on horizontal principles of communal mutual empowerment, rather than through the hierarchical (vertical) structures of *kyriarchy*. My contention is that thinking these dimensions together is constructive for both.

Feminist readers will need little clarification as to what radical orthodoxy might gain from feminist theological critique. The last two generations of feminist and other liberation theologians have effectively critiqued use of a vertical imaginary to underwrite *kyriarchal* power relations. My reasons for engaging the vertical imaginary of radical orthodoxy for feminist benefit are likely to be less obvious.

I set out my rationale in four stages as follows.

### **Alice and the Red Queen**

Readers who are familiar with Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass* will remember the scene where Alice wants to approach the Red Queen in the garden, but finds if she walks towards the Queen, she (Alice) ends up far away. Yet when Alice walks in the opposite direction, she finds herself face to face with the Queen. Feminist theologians seek to free themselves from oppressive *kyriarchal* structures in theology and Church, by walking away from the vertical imaginary and the power hierarchies it supports, through the development of a horizontal imaginary embodied in individual and communal lives, where women act as co-creators and redeemers in communities of

resistance and global solidarities. In my own case, this walking away, per-versely, has brought me back, face to face with the vertical imaginary of Christian theology. I documented the beginning of this journey in my article, "The Prodigal Daughter", which emerged from a keynote address I gave at the University of Glasgow in 2003.<sup>9</sup> In this article I drew on Sara Maitland's *Map of a New Country*, where she uses the image of women bearing new gifts to the institutional Church, which we have acquired through our involvement in the struggle for justice.<sup>10</sup>

The important thing here is that feminist theology has brought into being new possibilities for women who are committed to the struggle for justice as Christian theologians and believers. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's radical feminist hermeneutic of suspicion towards the biblical text and the wider tradition allows for simultaneous but distinct moments within feminist theology: critique of *kyriarchal* power relations that claim authority from the vertical Christian theological imaginary; and reconstructions of theological thinking that insist on the embodiment inherent in incarnation, on human solidarity and just relations, and on respect for the earth. After four decades of feminist theology, this statement is hardly ground-breaking. However, I want to draw attention to the potential for returning feminist creativity within the stream of Christian theology that has been reinvigorated by a return to the vertical imaginary; this vertical move is made over against the Christian humanism encouraged by nineteenth century liberal Protestantism. I speak of the return to trinitarian thinking encouraged by theologians following in the wake of Barth, Moltmann, and von Balthasar, including the postliberal approaches of Frei, Lindbeck and Hauerwas – and radical orthodoxy.

It would be entirely consistent for feminist theologians to read these theologies as restatements of a form of Christian theology which has already been the subject of rigorous feminist critique, and which is therefore unworthy of further feminist attention: from this point of view, the ground has already been cleared of these vertical imaginings, and their undesirable political effects, so the work of feminist construction can and should continue, without a backward glance in their direction. However, the energy and strength of current feminist

<sup>9</sup> "The Prodigal Daughter: Orthodoxy Revisited", in: *Feminist Theology* 15 (Jan 2007), 186-201.

<sup>10</sup> Sara Maitland, *Map of the New Country: Women and Christianity* (Routledge: London 1983), here 111 refers to women returning to the Church after a time spent in the wilderness. It is clear from her book that the gifts women bring derive from the solidarity of shared sisterhood in exile from the Church, informed by the wider women's movement.

theology opens new possibilities. The feminist hermeneutic of suspicion can be brought to these theologies, to probe them for perpetuated *kyriarchal* effects. But in addition, feminist theologians can insist on the inadequacy of the vertical imaginary if it is not simultaneously enriched by horizontal constructions of feminist theology: feminist theology fills out the implications of the incarnation for humanity and theology, and demands these implications are taken into account.

My proposal is that feminist theology can operate in (at least) two intersecting and different modes: the first creates new spaces for theological construction, outside the parameters set by trinitarian theology with its clear distinction between the economic and the immanent trinities; the second re-inhabits this traditional vertical imaginary, insisting that feminist critique and reconstruction in terms of the struggle for justice be taken into account. In engaging feminist theology with radical orthodoxy, the horizontal with the vertical, human co-creation and co-redemption with divine revelation, I clearly situate my project within the second mode. One further point here is that the second mode is entirely dependent on the first. The critique and reconstruction of feminist theology provide the yardstick by which trinitarian restatements can be brought to account.

At stake in this discussion is the question as to whether feminist theology is a successor theology to the *kyriarchally* flawed tradition that preceded it, giving rise to women's redemptive communities that are successor communities to the denominational churches. Ruether has long articulated a parallel existence of institutional church and Spirit-filled community, in tension with one another. The question is whether feminist theologians are to be found only in Spirit-filled women's redemptive communities, or whether they also work in the institutional church, with its orthodox belief and practice which has been compromised by the exercise of *kyriarchal* power. The approach I am taking is of relevance to feminist theologians who maintain their position within the institutional churches, and who find themselves as orthodox believers, in accordance with the liturgical practices of established faith communities that induct believers into a vertical imaginary. My proposal resists the notion that feminist theology is necessarily a successor theology for a successor form of redemptive community. However, I should not be read as advocating a single path for feminist theology. My argument offers a rationale for the path I am following as one possible mode of feminist theology among others; it brings into question the notion that the vertical imaginary of divine revelation is necessarily incompatible with or opposed to feminist theological commitments.

### Transcendence and the Vertical Imaginary

I need to push my argument further. To demonstrate the ability of feminist theology to augment the “poverty” of radical orthodoxy in the horizontal dimension is one thing; to demonstrate a possible benefit to feminist theology from thinking in the vertical dimension is quite another. Here, once more, I invoke previous work. In a book chapter on transcendence, I have investigated invocation of the transcendent triune God, over against both secular immanence and forms of thinking the transcendent that show this secular influence.<sup>11</sup> Here I work with the grain of radical orthodox reassertion of alterity between the divine and the human. I take this step in the conviction that collapse of this alterity is problematic, as the human then becomes self-referencing; when divine-human alterity is denied, the divine as reference point for the becoming of full humanity is necessarily collapsed into the human. Drawing on Patrice Haynes’s argument that the notion of divine transcendence is fully capable of affirming materiality and embodiment, I seek to uphold the vertical as capable of achieving similar transformations in the gendered economy to those that others have sought through horizontal strategies.<sup>12</sup>

Once again Rivera’s rich notion of relational transcendence informs my view. Rivera develops her constructive theology of relational transcendence by drawing on this modernist secular trajectory; her aim is to “remobilize the passion and wisdom of a Christian love for the inappropriable divine Other for rethinking our relationship with human others”.<sup>13</sup> Yet she cedes the “Trinitarian journey” to an orthodoxy that must remain at odds with the relational transcendence she brings into being; I argue that at this point, Rivera’s proposal rests on Irigaray’s secularised transcendental.<sup>14</sup> My contention is that Rivera’s gift to feminist theology, in all its embodied richness, might fruitfully be relocated, in addition, as participation in the triune divine transcendence that “lovingly invests the material”.<sup>15</sup> For Rivera, the divine glory enfolding all is proclaimed in relational transcendence;<sup>16</sup> returning her constructive

<sup>11</sup> Jenny Dagers, “Transcendence and the Refiguring of God as Male, the Absolute Same,” in: Lisa Isherwood and Elaine Bellchambers (eds.), *Through Us, With Us, In Us: Relational Theologies* (SCM: London 2010), 197-211.

<sup>12</sup> Lisa Isherwood, Elaine Bellchambers, “Transcendence”, 205-206.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Dagers, “Transcendence”, 206.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Dagers, “Transcendence”, 208.

<sup>15</sup> Haynes, cited in Dagers, “Transcendence”, 206.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Dagers, “Transcendence”, 208.

theology within the vertical maintains the alterity between the source of divine glory and humanity.

### **Gender Troubling and the Vertical Imaginary**

The first stage of my argument traced a somewhat perverse return to orthodox trinitarian belief that could only happen through the process of walking in the other direction opened by feminist theology. The second stage argued the need for divine-human alterity, which re-opens the way to vertical trinitarian thinking, in order to provide a reference point beyond the human for coming to full humanity and just human relations. Without this external reference point, how will the impetus towards the *kyriarchical* principle be resisted? The third stage of my argument turns to the implications of the gender trouble that postmodern philosophy and queer theology has brought to our thinking on gender and sexual difference, and to our embodied ways of living. In the available space I will discuss two indicative examples.

Gender trouble has a profound effect on feminist thinking and practice. Instabilities in the gendered economy are thrown into stark relief by different kinds of “troubling” thinking. I will briefly consider two examples of forms of thinking that open new avenues for feminist theology in both of the modes discussed above. First, Julia Kristeva portrays a subject-in-process, thoroughly constrained within the Lacanian schema for understanding synchronic and diachronic human development. A sense of confinement was my first response to Kristeva’s writings. However, I have become more attuned to the potential inherent in the instability in human subjectivity, due to semiotic disruptions of the conscious self by material from the unconscious. By Kristeva’s logic, the influence of the repressed maternal is always evident.<sup>17</sup> The implication I wish to highlight here is that the staunchest of male theologians, whose patriarchal attitudes have shaped the received tradition of Christian theology, and who have deservedly been the subject of stringent feminist critique, may also, on scrutiny, be shown to bear the marks of the maternal in their work. These traces may be capable of retrieval by contemporary feminist-informed theologians, in order to put them to a different use. There is a form of gender-troubling here that indicates potential feminist resources, in addition to the recovery of submerged women’s traditions within the history of Church and theology.

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<sup>17</sup> I would like to acknowledge here that my reassessment of Kristeva began with my reading of Sîan Melville Hawthorne, “Origins, Genealogies, and The Politics of Identity: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Myth.” Unpublished PhD thesis SOAS (University of London, 2006).



As my second example, queer theology disrupts the normative heterosexual boundaries defining woman and man and their interrelations. The fluidity of sexed identity disrupts theological reassertion of complementary gendered identities of women and men, and exposes the inadequacy of assumed male and heterosexual identity ascribed to God the Father in much trinitarian thinking.<sup>18</sup> My contention is that this critique can be used to hold trinitarian theology to account, and to insist on rethinking of assumed patriarchal, heterosexual and other forms of the will to power in relation to the triune God, and in human relations consequent on these assumptions and supposedly justified by them. Both examples suggest that the triune God, thought in the vertical dimension, can powerfully underwrite the horizontal economy, characterised by fluidity in gender and sexuality; the vertical does not have to be ceded to the support of *kyriarchy*.

### **Postcolonial Troubling of the Vertical Imaginary**

Even if readers have been persuaded by the first three stages of my argument for the feminist possibilities of thinking in a vertical dimension (provided this is fully engaged with the horizontal), one major objection remains. The conversation I have initiated between radical orthodoxy and feminist theology is clearly opening a new chapter in a longstanding *western* conversation, which is rooted in the inculturation of early Christianity in Greek philosophical thought. Given that numerous postcolonial theologians have contested the applicability of this western philosophical tradition to expanding Christianity beyond the western world,<sup>19</sup> surely the mode I envisage for feminist theology would turn my back on solidarity with feminist theology in Latin America, Africa and Asia in favour of reinscribing Eurocentric concerns?

My response to this significant criticism is to suggest a distinction between the European and the Eurocentric. As the global power of European modernity diminishes, European concerns shrink within their local borders. As a European woman theologian, I am caught up in “continental” (i.e. European) philosophy

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<sup>18</sup> Within a broad field of queer theology, the contribution of the late Marcella Althaus-Reid stands out in this respect, particularly her book *The Queer God* (Routledge: London 2003). My argument is that the stringent challenge Althaus-Reid makes to trinitarian theology is capable of being brought within trinitarian theology, rather than ceding trinitarian thought to kyriarchal purposes.

<sup>19</sup> Two significant indicative texts are Aloysius Pieris SJ, “Christ Beyond Dogma: Doing Christology in the Context of the Religions and the Poor,” in: *Louvain Studies* 25(3) (2000), 187-231 and Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (SCM: London 2005).

and the possibilities this approach opens for Christian theology in the vertical dimension, which both reinstates and restates theological thinking that began with incarnation in Jesus Christ, and is continued in the biblical text and in theological debate that first took shape in dialogue with Greek philosophy. Taken together, the first three stages in my argument suggest that feminist theology has created the conditions in which its founding critique of Christian patriarchy can be addressed within this foundational stream of trinitarian Christian thought.

Fiorenza's broadening of feminist critique of patriarchy to encourage solidarity with those movements who resist all forms of *kyriarchy* has already been extended to join feminist theology with postcolonial theology. Postcolonial critique highlights continuing colonising effects of power by exercising a hermeneutic of suspicion towards the colonial Christ of early Christianity, of modern European colonialism, and of continuing forms of empire. However, foundational trinitarian Christian theology – and its *kyriarchal* distortion – belongs as much to Asian Christianity as it does to the western Christian tradition. In addition, as a European feminist theologian, I am connected with the wider global network of feminist theology. It is therefore possible that this “local” conversation I have contrived between white British radical orthodoxy and white and Latina American feminist theology has wider relevance for Christian theology in the postcolonial world. Apart from addressing a common problem of *kyriarchy*, the question of whether revelation and thus redemption is generated within the finitude of human community, or through divine disruption from outside it, is pertinent beyond the arena of Anglo-American theological debate.

In conclusion, in this article, I have attempted to set out a fuller rationale for my project of bringing feminist theology into conversation with radical orthodoxy, so bringing together horizontal and vertical theological imaginaries, with implications for the practices in which these are embedded. I hope this will be useful to supplement the paper given at Salamanca. My intervention is within a local European conversation that could have a wider relevance for postcolonial theology. I write the feminist theology offered here with and from feminist theology in other recognisable modes, including the postcolonial.

El movimiento teológico anglo-americano “radical orthodoxy” que surgió a comienzos de los años 90 otorga a la posmodernidad el potencial de interrelacionarse con temas teológicos como por ejemplo con el pensamiento trinitario, un tema

que se ha ido disminuyendo en la teología moderna. Sin embargo, el movimiento “radical orthodoxy” ataca a la teología de la liberación y con ello a la teología feminista y no se dedica al poder kyriarchal y al sufrimiento de los pobres. En analogía podríamos hablar de una intersección vertical y horizontal de la teología feminista con el movimiento “radical orthodoxy”, pero el asunto es más complicado. La autora examina como el uso de un imaginario vertical, regresando al pensamiento trinitario, podría ser un punto de referencia externo para la teología feminista para involucrar el pensamiento kyriarchal partiendo sobre todo del “género en disputa” y de perspectivas poscoloniales.

In Anglo-American theology the Radical Orthodoxy movement that began in the 1990's asserts a potential in postmodernity to reconnect with theological themes, such as trinitarian thinking, that have been diminished in modern theology. However, radical orthodoxy attacks liberation theology and thus feminist theology, and does not address the issues of kyriarchal power and the suffering of the poor. We may speak of a vertical and horizontal intersection by way of analogy with an intersection between feminist theology and radical orthodoxy, but the picture is more complicated than that. The author examines how the use of a vertical imaginary by feminist theology, in the form of a return to trinitarian thinking, could make an external reference point available to aid in countering kyriarchal thinking particularly from gender-troubling and postcolonial perspectives.

In der englischen und amerikanischen Theologie stellt die Bewegung der *Radical Orthodoxy*, die in den 1990ern aufkam, das Potential fest, sich in der Postmoderne erneut mit theologischen Themen wie dem trinitarischen Denken zu befassen, die in der modernen Theologie vernachlässigt wurden. Die *Radical Orthodoxy* greift jedoch Befreiungs- und also auch die feministische Theologie an und befasst sich nicht mit Fragen der kyriarchalen Macht und dem Leiden der Armen. Wir können von einer vertikalen und horizontalen Intersektion sprechen, in einer Analogie mit der Intersektion zwischen feministischer Theologie und *Radical Orthodoxy*, aber die Sache ist doch noch komplizierter. Die Autorin untersucht, wie die Verwendung eines vertikalen Imaginären durch die feministische Theologie, in der Form einer Rückkehr zum trinitarischen Denken, einen externen Bezugspunkt darstellen könnte, der dazu beitragen kann, um kyriarchalem Denken insbesondere von gender-beunruhigten und postkolonialen Perspektiven zu begegnen.

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