New Catholic Feminism

Roman Catholicism exerts a continuing influence on the culture and politics of the world’s nations, and never more so than on issues of gender and sexuality. If the Catholic Church is to continue to be relevant to modern women, it needs to go beyond its traditional anachronistic sexual stereotypes and hierarchies, to present the Gospel in a way that is attentive to the questions, needs and values of the age, without surrendering the central truths of Christian faith.

New Catholic Feminism is a radical and dramatic feminist enactment of the Catholic faith. Engaging with feminist theory and postmodern feminist theology, Tina Beattie offers a detailed and often disturbing analysis of Catholic neo-orthodoxy in its representation of gender and sexual difference. Through encounters with thinkers such as Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Martin Heidegger and Hans Urs von Balthasar, Beattie explores Catholicism’s gendered imagery and sacramentality in the context of language, sexuality, prayer and the body, questioning the assumptions upon which neo-orthodoxy rests in its resistance to women priests, and its theological models of masculinity and femininity. Having confronted the conflict between feminism and the Vatican and Pope Benedict XVI, Beattie proposes a new theological approach to the encounter between feminism and Catholicism, for the twenty-first century.

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Preface

In 1999, when Graham Ward examined my doctoral thesis, he pointed out that I was somewhat dismissive of Hans Urs von Balthasar, and he wondered if I might have offered a more developed analysis of his theology. I replied that I thought life was too short to analyse Balthasar. (By that time I knew I had passed, so I could afford to be flippant.)

In the years since then, Balthasar has become increasingly significant for Catholic theology and for some Anglican thinkers, although he has been largely ignored by feminist theologians. As I encountered Catholic theologians who seemed to be almost in awe of Balthasar, I began to wonder if perhaps I had been too quick to dismiss him. Maybe I had missed something. Maybe he really was, as some would argue, the Catholic Church’s answer to feminism. This idea engaged me more, the more dissatisfied I became with both liberal and postmodernist feminist theologies, which often subordinate the doctrinal and existential content of Christian faith and worship to the secularized perspectives of liberal feminism and feminist theory respectively.

Six years later, having plumbed the depths of Balthasar’s sexual theology, I think I was probably correct in my initial evaluation. Nevertheless, given his growing influence, and given the extent to which, almost without exception, the theologians who engage with him as translators and interpreters seem oblivious to the violence inherent in his theology with regard to female sexuality, I hope that this book will make an original contribution to feminist theology, while providing a source of provocation and challenge to those theologians—women as well as men—who have fallen under his spell. Despite the severity of my criticism, in seeking ways of bringing a feminist reading to Balthasar’s theology and symbolism, I have discovered quite astonishing resonances between postmodern psycholinguistic theory and neo-orthodox Catholic theology, so that I hope that this book does suggest a genuinely new way of doing feminist theology, beyond both liberal feminism and feminist theory. Even if there have been times of intense struggle in grappling with deeply disturbing theological ideas, this has felt like an exhilarating intellectual journey through relatively unexplored territory, where I have discovered much to celebrate as well as much to criticize.

During the book’s long gestation, I have been more grateful than I can say for those many friends and colleagues who have encouraged me to keep going, and who have allowed me to explore controversial questions in a supportive intellectual milieu. In particular, the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain has been a source of intellectually rigorous debate and warm friendship, providing replenishment and sustenance for the sometimes lonely task of doing theology in the conflicted terrain between the authoritarianism of the contemporary Church, and the secularism of the contemporary academy.

To begin to list names is always to risk leaving out those many people—friends and family as well as students and colleagues—who form the matrix within which theological
ideas are nurtured and explored. However, my thanks go to Pamela Sue Anderson, Sarah Jane Boss, Beverley Clack, Julie Clague, Gavin D’Costa, Philip Endean, Harriet Harris, Grace Jantzen, Sebastian Moore, Marcus Pound, Janet Martin Soskice and Frank Turner, who have all provided encouragement and feedback during the course of writing this, and to Sarah Butler, Fergus Kerr, Michael Kirwan and Nicholas Lash for their information and advice. As members of the National Board of Catholic Women Bioethics Subcommittee, Mary Hallaway, Mary McHugh, Patricia Stoat and I have put the world and the Church to rights many times during the mellow warmth of late-night conversations over bottles of wine and good food, reminding me that doing theology among friends can be one of the richest of shared interests. Ali Green’s research has provided an interesting insight into the ways in which some of the ideas explored in this book might be interpreted from the perspective of an Anglican theology of women’s ordination. Gerard Loughlin has been a soulmate and source of continuing inspiration, both in the grace of his theology and in the many conversations and e-mail exchanges which have provided a space of shared humour and consolation in the ongoing struggle to be fully human and fully Catholic. In the years since Ursula King supervised my doctoral studies, she has remained a loyal and generous friend and critic. She serves as a reminder to me that it is possible to combine a profound commitment to feminist scholarship with a generosity and abundance of living in which there is always time for family and friends, as well as a continual enthusiasm for encounters with new faces and places. I am truly indebted to her for all that she has done to inspire and encourage me in my personal and professional life.

My thanks are due to the Leverhulme Foundation, for providing me with a Research Fellowship which enabled me to finish this book. I am also grateful to the editors I have worked with at Routledge, and most particularly to Lesley Riddle and Gemma Dunn for their encouragement and patience over the last year. As my Head of School at Roehampton University, Lyndie Brimstone has vigorously defended the time needed for academic research against the ever-encroaching demands of modern academic bureaucracy, and I am grateful for her understanding and support.

Finally, there is my family, but that word seems too domesticated to describe the group to which it refers, a sprawling community of people aged 2 to 87, spread across three continents, bound together by memories and stories as much as by genes and bodies. One of the exciting experiences of having adult children is the constant expansion of boundaries—metaphorical and real—to accommodate new people, new visions, new challenges and new possibilities. If this book explores strange and sometimes abstract theoretical concepts, it has nonetheless been nourished in the sacramentality of everyday life with all its muddles and compromises, and its epiphanies of grace experienced in the most ordinary details of living and loving. I hope that something of that world shows through the gaps. I doubt if those I know and love most will read this (life is, after all, too short!), but without them I could not have written it, for they have provided me with a space of stability and security that has made it possible to let go of a great many certainties and wade out into intellectual waters which have at times seemed too deep and too dark for comfort.

This book is for all my friends and family who, in eucharistic encounters where the kinship of food and wine, of shared hope and suffering, overflows the boundaries of doctrine and liturgy, nonetheless have helped me to see that there is after all some
profound connection between the practices of everyday life and the Church’s liturgical performances of faith, which will always elude the power of the grizzled old men who seek to control the vulnerability and fecundity of Christ among us. Above all, this book is for Dave—because he is different.
You need only observe the kind of attention women bestow upon a concert, an opera or a play—the childish simplicity, for example, with which they keep on chattering during the finest passages in the greatest masterpieces… [I]n lieu of saying, ‘Let a woman keep silence in the church,’ it would be much to the point to say, ‘Let a woman keep silence in the theatre.’ This might, perhaps, be put up in big letters on the curtain.
Introduction

The final writing of this book has taken place during a year when the Catholic Church has rarely been out of the news. From the improbable alliance between conservative Catholics and Protestant evangelicals which helped George W. Bush to win the 2004 American elections, to the death of Pope John Paul II and the subsequent election of Pope Benedict XVI, Roman Catholicism exerts a continuing influence on the culture and politics of the world’s nations.¹

Although the Catholic Church has become increasingly radical in its social teachings, particularly under the papacy of John Paul II, and the gulf between the Church and the western democracies on issues of economics, war and social justice has widened as the military and economic dominance of the western nations has increased, the Church’s political impact in these areas has been relatively small. Its continuing power to influence western politics has been most apparent, not on issues of justice and peace but on issues of gender and sexuality, at least insofar as contemporary American politics is concerned. Thus, a president whose position on a range of issues from the environment and economics to war and capital punishment stands in stark opposition to Catholic social teaching found support among Catholics primarily because he was not John Kerry, a Catholic who was seen to support abortion and whose Democratic Party was perceived as being dangerously liberal with regard to issues such as homosexuality, marriage and the family, even though Kerry had a good voting record on issues of social welfare, global poverty and the environment that some might say should be of equal concern to Catholic voters.²

This increasing conservatism of the Catholic Church was given added impetus with the election of Pope Benedict XVI. Peter J. Boyer, writing in The New Yorker, claimed that ‘For many Catholics, the white smoke that curled into the Vatican sky in the early evening of April 19th quickly came to be seen as a distress signal.’³ It is too early to assess the influence of the new papacy on questions concerning the role of women in the Church. Although Cardinal Ratzinger was known as a harsh authoritarian when he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, his homilies and statements since becoming Pope suggest at least the possibility of a more dialogical approach. In his inaugural homily, he spoke inspiringly of what he saw as his pastoral mission:

The pastor must be inspired by Christ’s holy zeal: for him it is not a matter of indifference that so many people are living in the desert. And there are so many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst, the desert of abandonment, of loneliness, of destroyed love. There is the desert of God’s darkness, the emptiness of souls no longer aware of their dignity or the goal of human life. The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts
have become so vast. Therefore the earth’s treasures no longer serve to build God’s garden for all to live in, but they have been made to serve the powers of exploitation and destruction. The Church as a whole and all her Pastors, like Christ, must set out to lead people out of the desert, towards the place of life, towards friendship with the Son of God, towards the One who gives us life, and life in abundance.4

This is a vision that many Christian feminists might applaud, but the challenge is how to communicate to the Catholic hierarchy that the ‘holy zeal’ of the Church’s pastors is, for a growing number of faithful women, part of the problem and not part of the solution. For many of us, ‘the internal deserts’ become more vast as the Church’s sacramental life becomes more arid. We seek full participation in the vision that the Pope so eloquently sets before us. We share his faith in the redeeming love of Christ, and his passionate concern for a world where so many suffer under the ‘powers of exploitation and destruction’. But until women are recognized as full and equal participants in the life of faith, until we are acknowledged as persons graced with the image of God, capable of representing Christ to the world as fully and effectively as men do, the Church herself will continue to be a spiritual desert where men’s fears and fantasies lead them to refuse the grace that female sacramentality might bring to Catholic liturgical and institutional life. Pope Benedict XVI went on to say that ‘All ideologies of power justify themselves in exactly this way, they justify the destruction of whatever would stand in the way of progress and the liberation of humanity.’5 For some of us, struggling for the progress and liberation of our womanly humanity in a Church where the heavy hand of the hierarchy shadows our every move, those words cannot help but have a certain irony.

At such a time, it might seem that the most pressing task confronting feminist theologians is that of political struggle and resistance in the name of liberal values of freedom, democracy and equal rights, over and against the rising tides of religious and political conservatism. Sometimes during the last year I have wondered what I was doing, huddled over my desk exploring the dense, dark regions of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology and psycholinguistic theory, while my liberal Catholic friends shook their heads in dismay as the promises and hopes of Vatican II faded in the face of the Church’s increasingly reactionary tendencies. Surely, it would have been better and more profitable to rush off and write a book about feminism, theology and politics than to plough on with this intellectual struggle to produce a book that might at first glance seem far removed from and perhaps even irrelevant to the most urgent questions that Catholic women face in the contemporary world?

Yet I hope that this feminist psycholinguistic probing of the symbolism and sacramentality of the contemporary Church might ultimately be a more political act than the overtly political rhetoric of feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and there are several reasons for this. Having spent ten years teaching and studying feminist theology, while I do not entirely agree with those Catholic so-called new feminists who proclaim that feminism has failed (see Chapter 1), I think that the feminist theological vision has begun to stagnate and stands in need of revitalization. Unlike the new Catholic feminists, I do not believe that neo-orthodox Catholicism,6 informed by the theology of Balthasar and John Paul II but also manifesting the kind of social and sexual ideologies that are a feature of contemporary
American politics, holds the key to such a feminist revival, but it has a significant contribution to make, if only through its capacity to stimulate close critical engagement with the Catholic tradition in a way that might liberate new meanings and possibilities for feminist theological reflection.

Western feminist theologians have to a large extent remained captive to a highly politicized and often agnostic theology, shaped by the priorities and commitments of a generation of liberal American Catholics whose ideas were formed in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, and whose power to define the parameters of contemporary theology remains significant. Rebecca Chopp suggests that American feminist theology needs to be understood within the wider context of American philosophical and political pragmatism on the one hand, and American public theology on the other: ‘feminist theology, placed as it is in the history of pragmatism and American public theology, works for the transformation of political and personal life away from patriarchy into freedom’. Chopp argues for a shift towards a more postmodern approach to questions of language and knowledge, calling for ‘productive strategies of transformation in terms of a critique of the depth texture of patriarchy’. This means recognizing that we cannot simply change metaphors or add new experiences to our dominant theological stew and stir, but that we must transform the very terms, patterns, and ordering of how language, culture, politics, and subjectivity work. We can criticize gender opposition and affirm theological practices of difference by opening up the realm of meaning and the rules of meaning-making.

In setting about the kind of task that Chopp describes, I seek a way beyond the politics of western liberal feminism, in order to develop a feminist theology of grace informed by a sense of the sacramentality of creation and by an awareness of the significance of prayer, revelation and faith for Christian ways of knowing, through a critical feminist refiguration of contemporary Catholic theology. This invites a feminist return to a European Catholic heritage, which is I believe more capable of expressing the complexity, depth and intellectual rigour of the Catholic tradition than the kind of American pragmatism to which Chopp refers. I include within this European heritage not only the mystical and classical theologies of thinkers such as Catherine of Siena and Thomas Aquinas, but also recent quasiCatholic theologies produced by psycholinguists such as Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan.

If feminists are to understand and challenge the misogyny that forms a dark undercurrent to the Catholic theological tradition, we must go beyond politics in order to ask why the Catholic hierarchy is so resistant to acknowledging the sacramentality of the female body in its capacity to reveal Christ. There is a profound fear of female sexuality that infects the celibate Catholic imagination, and I believe that this lies behind many of the Church’s other failings, not least her failure to challenge war and violence with the same unyielding absolutism with which she challenges abortion and contraception. Although feminists have done much to diagnose the symptoms of this sexual malaise, they have done relatively little to explore its possible causes.

Paradoxically, as the reader will discover in what follows, the language of post-Catholic psycholinguistics has the most profound resonances with the language of neo-
orthodox Catholic theology as far as sexuality, embodiment, desire and death are concerned. Perhaps this is because all the thinkers I engage with in this book—theologians and critical theorists—acknowledge a continuum between the innermost workings of the human psyche and the structures and systems which order our world. For Christians, as for psychoanalysts, it is through the healing and conversion of our psychic wounds that we become persons capable of living at peace with ourselves and with one another, through our attentiveness to the power of language to reveal and shape the worlds we inhabit. If this risks an individualistic ethos, both in Christianity and in psychoanalysis, it also invites recognition of the interdependence of psychology, politics and theology. Feminist theologians will not bring about a transformation in Christian politics and values by simply turning up the volume of their political sermonizing. Indeed, if American politics are any indication, this may be counter-productive, producing a backlash through a resort to forms of religious and political conservatism which have the power to eradicate the fragile equalities gained by women during the last century. There is a need to go beyond the rhetorical smokescreens of political discourse, in order to excavate some of the deeper layers of language and symbolism within which fear and desire are coiled together, emanating energies that have the power to corrode our most committed struggles for peace, justice and sexual equality.

When psycholinguistics and neo-orthodox theology are brought into intimate dialogue with one another, the confusion which surrounds the place of the female body in Catholic symbolism and sacramentality begins to burn with a dark intensity. This illuminates an unexplored space—virgin territory perhaps—which is at one and the same time charged with the most profound and threatening irrationality, but also with a sacramental and sexual potency that might yet bring about the transformation of the Catholic vision.

To undertake such a task, one must go beyond any moralistic formulation of right and wrong, true and false, to recognize the pervasive and insurmountable instability of the Christian story, particularly in its Catholic version. This story is a weaving together of multiple ‘texts’—performative narratives of faith extending in time and space across two thousand years of histories and localities—and it must be read simultaneously as a narrative of damnation and redemption, of poison and cure. Like Derrida’s reading of Plato’s pharmakon, it is untranslatable from the perspective of those who seek linguistic exactitude and philosophical precision, for ultimately it is undecidable, subject to a ‘strange logic’ which makes it resistant to translation into any other ‘language’—whether that is the language of philosophy, politics, psychology or gender theory. Outside of this story, one is neither saved nor damned, neither poisoned nor cured, any more than one is poisoned or cured by a drug that one does not swallow. It is only from within that one recognizes redemption and damnation, cure and poison, as the two sides of the fabric out of which faith is woven. It is through accepting the promise of redemption that one risks damnation, and through seeking the cure that one risks being poisoned. That is faith’s mystery, and it means that the Christian story is the locus of a dynamic, transgressive and dangerous volatility, sacramentally and socially embodied in the material world. Here we encounter God and Satan, the beatific and the demonic, the redeemed and the damned, and in historical, human terms they are inseparable. From the perspective of human reason, Catholic Christianity is an impossible paradox.

Perhaps nowhere was this paradox more apparent than in the exuberant excesses of mourning and celebration that surrounded the dying of John Paul II. Even the British
media—not normally noted for their pro-Catholic bias—were seduced into covering events in Rome with an aura of what sometimes felt like hushed awe and amazement, suspending critical judgement to show us the Catholic Church at prayer, lingering on images of candlelit vigils and weeping nuns, suggesting a Church made up of millions of devout and obedient believers brought together by the dying of a much-loved Pope. But the Catholic Church was also at play that fortnight, and perhaps media sensibilities attuned to a post-Protestant culture in which religion and moral conformity are seen to go hand in hand were less attentive to this other side of Catholicism, which is more medieval than modern in its unruly abundance.

For the dying of John Paul II was also a carnival of love and desire, of yearning and faith, erupting in the gaps of Catholicism, in the enigmatic meanings encoded within its devotions, practices and beliefs, suggesting a surge of life within this creaking institution that refuses to be controlled or silenced or eliminated. How many babies were conceived in Rome that week, in that vast human coming together? How many legitimate and forbidden sexual encounters sought to express a hope beyond death, enigmatically glimpsed in the stubborn charisma of a man whose faith at the end disrupted all the boundaries he so vigorously sought to defend? How many condoms were secretly disposed of in the Vatican’s litter bins? How many erotic couplings happened in the shade of Bernini’s columns? How many adulteries? How many gay embraces? How many furtive gropings of yearning and delight beneath the papal windows? Faith, sex and death. They feed on one another and fecundate one another, and our ability to accept any one must surely entail an ability to accept the other two, beyond violence, sacrifice and fear. This is the mystery and the paradox of the Catholic faith, beyond its institutions and hierarchies.

In opening up a dialogue between feminist and psycholinguistic theories and Catholic theology, I seek to demonstrate that the radical instability of Catholic Christianity is a potent resource for feminist theological reflection, but this depends upon keeping open the horizons of revelation and faith, against the closures of secular modernity. Unlike many postmodern feminist theologians, whose work I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1, my intention is not to subordinate theology to theory. Rather, I ask how feminist theory can help Catholic theologians to forge a new and more radical theological vision, through the sacramentality of a faith that seeks understanding in the aporia between the divine mystery and a graced creation—an epistemological space that tradition tells us is populated only by human reason and angels, but that today we also know as the rich and mysterious terrain of the unconscious, home to our hidden hauntings of ecstasy and abjection. Our postmodern secular culture has much more to say on the subject of angels than Christian theologians and worshippers, but Christianity needs to rediscover the potency of angelic mediations to inform a liturgical theology which draws on the insights of psychoanalysis in its understanding of language and desire, as the key to a revitalized sense of worship and sacramentality.

Nancy Dallavalle refers to the tendency among feminist theologians to seek ‘a reformulation of Christian tradition in the light of the emancipation of women, a position that continues to rest on an ethical, not a theological, basis’. 13 She argues that

Catholicity…can not be simply about justice. Rather it is primarily about sacramentality. Indeed, orthodoxy’s call to the right worship of God
involves not only the understanding that faith seeks but also a considered setting-aside of the norms of humanity for the grace of basking in the mystery of what human norms can never measure. Whatever universality or catholicity might imply, it is, finally, a mystery in which we are joined by ‘an account of your hope’ [1 Pet. 3:15] and in which neither the account (tradition) nor the hope (redemption, deification) are objects for our manipulation and comprehension.  

A feminist sacramental vision needs to refocus its lens beyond liberal feminism’s primary concerns of justice and equality, in order to recognize that faith, hope and love provide a more textured language for the mystery of our humanity than justice alone. If Christians profess a concern for the human person made in the image of God, then the very least we must do is to seek justice with all who share a similar concern for human well-being. But that is not what Christianity is ultimately about, nor is it in any sense unique to Christians to be concerned for justice. Christianity’s uniqueness, its particularity and its identity, derive from the drama it performs in the world—the drama of God incarnate who is carried in the womb of a virgin, who becomes the helpless infant at her breast, who eats, drinks, loves and laughs with ordinary people, who is tortured and put to death because the world does not understand him, and who gathers together all these incarnate human realities into a story of resurrection, reconciliation and the hope of eternal life. This story provides the narrative context within which Christians understand what justice requires of us, and it focuses the demand for justice on the vocation to recognize God in that which the world overlooks, abandons and forgets.

In a critique of feminist theology that focuses with particular severity on the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Susan Parsons argues that ‘nihilism shadows the writing of particular feminist theologians’, expressing itself through an over-reliance on the human power to achieve social transformation, and through a resistance to any understanding of faith that would offer hope beyond the Nietzschean death of God and the postmodernist fragmentation of meaning. Without such hope, Ruether’s moral exhortations…to establish a code of conduct based on some spurious notion of ‘solidarity in struggle’ is itself a postmodern, and thus a nihilistic move, acknowledging, by what it refuses to speak, its own lack of anything at all to say in the face of the absence of God, and masking itself with humility.  

In place of Ruether’s rhetoric of justice, Parsons invites a turning to the anguish of the world which waits with eager longing, and to the coming of God who raises from the dead and who calls us into a transcending thinking that may even lose the cloak of its own assumptions in its running for joy.

She calls for feminist theologians to ‘think anew what it is to be orthodox, to be informed by a tradition and embodied in its thinking, and to engage in a work of apologetic
theology for our day that is sensitive to the feminist critique’. In particular, this brings with it a requirement to ‘think redemption anew’, in order to articulate a hope that is ‘altogether more strange’ than the optimism of post-Enlightenment liberal humanism.

With Parsons, I go in search of the strange hope of the Catholic faith, in order to ‘think redemption anew’. I suspect that I am less sanguine than she is about the capacity of Catholicism to yield up its promises to feminist theology without a prolonged and intense struggle with its symbols and sacramental practices, and this book is written in the form of such a struggle. I invite the reader to accompany me on a quest through a labyrinth of conflicting and contested meanings, a linguistic landscape which inevitably becomes more uncanny and disorientating the more we explore its hidden depths, so that the style as well as the content of the book becomes increasingly exploratory and searching as we feel our way towards a clearing in the forest of faith, where a woman’s body might come into being.

This involves a style that is elliptical and even repetitive in places, for it presents itself not as a work of systematic theology but as a psycholinguistic probing of the underside of theological language and symbolism. As I seek to unearth hidden meanings and to listen to enigmatic silences and garbled expressions of denial and desire, I must often loop back on myself, revisiting some texts repeatedly from different angles, allowing ideas to emerge in different contexts, so that they yield up multiple meanings and interpretations. This also involves quoting extensively from key sources, for this is intended to be a multi-vocal theology which emerges through encounter and dialogue, and sometimes through conflict and contradiction. Lurking behind these ‘conversations’ is the awareness that meaning is constantly refigured anew in the process of translation, interpretation and combination. Beneath the illusory coherence of a monolinguistic study there are questions about the subtleties which are sacrificed as texts are translated between cultures, languages and generations, particularly with regard to gendered interpretations. Nevertheless, although I have consulted some texts in their original languages when I have been uncertain as to the reliability of the translation, my primary concern is to discover the potential of theological language to inform a bodily, sacramental performance of faith, and this means that language must be supple, capable of sculpting itself to the body’s grace, porous enough to allow its meanings to be expressed in gesture, speech and touch, and open to as many translations and interpretations as there are bodies to perform them.

The style and structure of the book are intended as a parodic feminist staging of Hans Urs von Balthasar’s idea of theo-drama. I ask what it means to take seriously his claim that the Christian story is God’s own story, played out on the world’s stage, in which our roles are determined to a very large extent in terms of sexuality and gender. By performing the woman’s role, I seek to expose the inconsistencies and contradictions in his theology, both in order to challenge the ways in which some new feminists cite his work as Catholicism’s response to feminism, and in order to ask how a feminist deconstruction of his theo-drama might open up different ways of interpreting the theological and sacramental significance of the sexual human body.

Seeking to avoid the kind of agnostic or atheistic assumptions inherent in much feminist theological discourse, I ask how feminist theology might rediscover the intimacy and otherness of the God of Christian revelation whom we encounter in the writings of mystics such as Catherine of Siena, for whom God was a ‘mad lover’ who...
pursued her through all the struggles of her often tormented spirituality, and in Aquinas for whom creation was a wondrous window into the love of an utterly unknowable God. This invites a rediscovery of the language of mysticism and prayer as channels into new ways of knowing and being, beyond the ontotheologies which still haunt the work of feminist theologians such as Ruether, who defines God as ‘the source of being that underlies creation and grounds its nature and future potential for continual transformative renewal in biophilic mutuality’. Such language remains trapped in the kind of metaphysics that has become increasingly problematic for theology after Heidegger, implying as it does a de-personalized, de-mysticized philosophical concept from which all language of desire has been evacuated. Heidegger was right when he suggested that

Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the causa sui, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god. The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as causa sui, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God.

Feminists refuse to sacrifice before the causa sui of man’s theology, but in their theologies many have also forgotten how to play music and dance before God. Beyond the puritanical political polemics of much feminist theology, we need to rediscover how to play as well as how to pray, and I suggest that this invites an opening up of the horizons of feminist theological discourse to a form of post-Heideggerian apophaticism, informed by the critical perspectives of psycholinguistics and gender theory.

This means that I enter into critical dialogue across a range of frontiers which are very often regarded as unbreachable by feminist thinkers. Through a serious engagement with psycholinguistic feminist theory and postmodern feminist theology, I offer a detailed and often disturbing analysis of Catholic neo-orthodoxy in its representation of gender and sexual difference. Yet I also allow Catholic theology to question and challenge the extent to which feminist theory, at least in its Anglo-American versions, is subservient to a secular ideology that is, I suggest, inimical to some of the ethical aims and deconstructive strategies of feminism. Thus I invite both feminist theory and postmodern feminist theology to go beyond an implicitly modernist acceptance of the secularization of knowledge, to ask how Catholic theology might contribute towards a transformed epistemology that would be more radical and transgressive than the secularized parodies of identity that feminist theorists perform before the closed horizons of modernity.

For those who approach what follows from a secular theoretical perspective, I invite the suspension of disbelief, a willingness to play theology’s language games, if only in order to discover that these are more complex and dynamic than secular thinkers acknowledge. If modern Catholic theology is an awesome and sometimes terrifying force for feminists to grapple with, it is also, I believe, an inexhaustibly rich source for feminist reflection and analysis—a source of jouissance as well as abjection, and I have experienced both in writing this. There have been times when I have felt sick with dread at where my analysis is leading, finding myself in linguistic spaces that are far more sticky and visceral than the stylized sexual morphologies of an Irigaray or a Kristeva, because they are not safely contained exercises in inter-textuality. The language is sacramental rather than symbolic. It has a performative dimension, and seeds itself deep in the body’s responses and desires. For women, these seeds have sometimes flowered in