

## Rule 4? Gender Difference and the Nature of Doctrine

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**Abstract:** Any attempt to talk about God today must accept the challenge of feminist theology. This article examines some aspects of the feminist critique of traditional christology and suggests a possible response in terms of "rule 4". That is, reflecting on George Lindbeck's claim that there are three regulative principles at work in the shaping of the classic doctrines of the incarnation and the trinity, the author suggests that feminist theology has brought to light a fourth rule: only those things may be claimed as *theologically* essential in the interpretation of Christ as could equally well be claimed for an imaginative Christa.

IN THE SPACE OF LITTLE MORE THAN TWO DECADES feminist theology has made its influence felt world-wide. Any attempt to talk about God which hopes to be taken seriously today must confront the challenge of this theology. In the essay which follows I want to examine some aspects of the feminist critique of traditional *christology* and suggest a possible response to it.

### THE WORD BECAME *MALE*FLESH

The issue between women and the church is nowhere more sharply focussed than in the question of christology. It may be possible to think of God as essentially beyond gender specification. It may be possible to conceive of a theological anthropology that genuinely affirms women as made "in the image of God". It may even be possible to imagine a community of religious faith in which women share equally in leadership, authority and sacramental power, with men. But everything seems to come to grief on the affirmation that defines Christianity itself, namely, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God. Though all else about him may be in dispute, this is agreed by everyone: Jesus was a male. Naomi Goldenberg puts it bluntly:

Jesus Christ cannot symbolise the liberation of women. A culture that maintains a masculine image for its highest divinity cannot allow its women to experience themselves as the equals of its men. In order to develop a theology of women's liberation, feminists have to leave Christ and the Bible behind them.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: feminism and the end of traditional religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979) 22.

Daphne Hampson arrives at the same conclusion. It hardly matters whether the view of Christ is one that follows classic theology by affirming his being as of "one substance with the Father", or is more inclined to stress the historical aspect of his life; neither sort of christology is compatible with the values and aspirations of any feminism worth the name. "Christian feminism", according to Hampson, is a contradiction in terms:

However "high" a Christology one may have, the divine nature of Christ is still bonded to the human nature of a human who was male. However "low" a Christology, this human person, who is a man, is not simply human but his human nature is bonded to a divine nature.<sup>2</sup>

This is a far-reaching critique in anyone's terms. Liberation theologians sometimes complain that "christology has obscured history", meaning that the real Jesus, Jesus as he actually lived and acted, has been obscured and distorted in the history of christological interpretation of him. This "real" Jesus does not support and is not reflected by oppressive christologies of one kind or another. Goldenberg and Hampson go further. They argue that it is not merely the *interpreted* Christ that is the problem, but the male identity of Jesus, both in history and in theology, which prevents women from finding liberty and fulfilment in him. It is God incarnate in *male* flesh that is the difficulty. Christology inevitably obscures rather than reveals God for women. This is a critique not of the form but of the substance of theology. As a consequence, Hampson regards herself as "post-christian": "Christian feminists want to change the actors in the play, what I want is a different kind of play."<sup>3</sup>

There is a certain irony in the fact that this radical feminist stance shares fundamental presuppositions with the most conservative of (masculine) Christian perspectives. For these latter views, also, the maleness of Christ is neither incidental nor accidental. What it means for them, however, is not a social construct – patriarchal ideology, which must be changed – but the order of creation, which cannot be changed. The Fatherhood of God, headship in marriage, authority of the clergy and so on, are essentially and fundamentally associated with maleness as a given of *revelation*. Hampson quotes the words of the American Protestant, Thomas Howard:

Jews and Christians worship the God who has gone to vast and prolonged pains to disclose himself to us as he not she, as King not

2. Daphne Hampson, *Theology and feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 59. See also Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Christology has been the doctrine of the Christian tradition that has been most frequently used against women" in her *To change the world: christology and cultural criticism* (London: SCM Press, 1981) 45.

3. Hampson, *Theology and feminism*, 162.

Queen, and for Christians as Father not Mother, and who sent his Son not his daughter in his final unveiling of himself for our eyes. These are terrible mysteries and we have no warrant to tinker with them.<sup>4</sup>

These “terrible mysteries” are in no way supposed to denigrate women. Women have their God-given place in the created scheme of things. But it is the place of “sacrificial giving”, of reception, of following, of nurturing. Howard makes his case by appeal to “revelation”. The Bible mediates this understanding of God. And the Bible is to be received as God’s own self-manifestation. It is not to be tinkered with.

Again it is somewhat ironic that Protestants of this persuasion find themselves, on the women’s issue as almost no other, at one with conservative Roman Catholic perspectives. For the same framework of thought also makes a convenient case for sacramentalists. Official Catholic doctrine has consistently used the christological argument against the ordination of women. The sign of the sacrament must be congruent with that which it signifies, the argument runs. A woman in the sacramental role, because of her biological constitution, obscures the requisite congruence. Therefore in representing Christ, and through him, God, the priest must of necessity be male. The priest “acts...*in persona Christi*, taking the role of Christ to the point of being his very image.”<sup>5</sup> Thus the maleness of Christ appears to be a crucial link, if not the anchor pin, in a chain that sustains a male-dominated interpretation of the world, the church, the ministry, the sacraments, and ultimately God *himself*.

All liberation theologies are agreed on the judgment that theology that leads to injustice is *ipso facto* bad theology. You cannot love God and treat women as dirt. Feminism thus uncovers a particular variation on a general uneasiness with doctrines of grace or revelation that move for a “suspension of the ethical”. As Walter Kaufmann argued against Kierkegaard’s interpretation of Abraham’s famous attempt to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to an instruction from God, any so-called “revelation” of the will of God that leads you to plan the murder of your only child is abhorrent, whatever fancy theological theories of “obedience” and “offering” you spin out. Murder is murder, and that’s what Abraham is plotting against Isaac.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, it is “cheap grace” – though very expensive for women! – which allows men to suspend the

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4. Hampson, *Theology and feminism*, 66. The original is taken from a speech given by the Anglican bishop Graham Leonard to the General Synod of the Church of England in 1978. There is no further indication of the original source of Howard’s comments.

5. *Inter Insigniores: declaration on the question of the admission of women to the ministerial priesthood*, 15 October, 1976, in L. Swidler and A. Swidler (eds.), *Women priests: a catholic commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977) 43-4; quoted in Hampson, *Theology and feminism*, 68.

6. Walter Kaufmann, *The faith of a heretic* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963) 73; see 70-6.

principle of justice in the call for gender equity on the grounds that "revelation" or "sacramental congruence" require them to take a position of superiority over women. It is a threadbare defence to argue that "headship", "priesthood", and access to the lion's share of power are not "inequality", but really true dignity appropriately "nuanced" to account for God-given differences. "The sacrificial animal does not share the spectators' ideas about sacrifice," says Nietzsche, "but one has never let it have its say."<sup>7</sup> Justice says: Ask Isaac about sacrifice before you jump to his father's theological conclusions. Ask women about the benefits to them of male redeemers.

The conclusion which Goldenberg and Hampson come to is clear: the Christian conception of God cannot liberate women. The Christian God is a patriarch through and through. Jesus tells us so.

#### JESUS THE FEMINIST

Some of the best attempts to answer this kind of critique start with a re-examination of the person of Jesus. Like the tactics of the liberation theologians – understandably so since their causes are not dissimilar – some feminists turn to the historical Jesus as the touchstone of their christology. They try to demonstrate that for all the patriarchal interpretation of Christ in the tradition of the church, Jesus of Nazareth, in his concrete historical existence, was remarkably free from patriarchal attitudes. And this is true despite the fact that he lived in a strongly patriarchal society.

But even after all the detective work is done, questions remain. As with any approach to the religious significance of Jesus via historical research into his life and context, the results of these investigations remain tentative and debatable. Was Jesus quite so feminist as he is portrayed? Can we honestly conclude from what can be known of his sayings and parables that he was concerned to address the socio-economic and politico-religious dimensions of patriarchy? Nicolas Slee, for example, has shown that "of the main characters in the synoptic parables of Jesus, 211 are male and only 21 female (of whom 10 are bridesmaids!)."<sup>8</sup> Not an outstanding strike rate one would have thought. Perhaps it is more plausible to take a neutral stance: "Jesus was neither a feminist nor a misogynist. His central message simply lay elsewhere."<sup>9</sup> Can such uncertainties really be the basis for an affirmation of the fundamental theological significance of women in the

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The gay science* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974) Book III, 220, 210.

8. See Nicolas Slee, "Parables and women's experience", *The modern churchman* 26/2 (1984) 25-31. The sentence quoted is from Julie Hopkins, *Towards a feminist Christology* (London: SPCK, 1995) 35.

9. Judith Ochshorn, *The female experience and the nature of the divine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981) 173; quoted by Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology*, 23.

divine scheme of things? Will any message from the past, especially a past now so far removed in time and tradition from our own, speak with the healing power required to deconstruct patriarchal religion and reconstruct new and just communities in its stead?

The advantage of a "low" christology, that is one that approaches Jesus as essentially just another human being, is that his maleness "then would seem to be of no more import than his or her sexuality in the case of any other human being."<sup>10</sup> We can examine Jesus' words and actions and take from them what seems to be of help, as we would, say, with Socrates, or Moses, or Hampson herself. The problem then is, why bother with Jesus? If Jesus is a human like any other, there is no christology, but only a Jesus message. There may well be others whose actions and words on the matter of gender justice are more accessible and more to the point than those of Jesus: "A Christian position must necessarily hold of this human being Jesus that he existed (or exists) in relation to God as no other."<sup>11</sup> This is what makes him important. This is what places his name in the centre of Christian liturgy and worship. And this is what makes him crucial in Christian understandings of *God*. It is not that God *tells* us what God is like, or even shows us the divine nature as in a mirror. It is rather that God makes Divine reality present in a particular historical form.<sup>12</sup> We are back with Hampson's original complaint. This christological theory appears to make the maleness of Jesus integral to an understanding of God. And that shuts out half the human race. It is to the question of christologies of incarnation and the feminist critique of them that I want now to turn.

#### A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Suppose, as our century draws to its close, a shepherdess, wandering the shores of the Dead Sea, were to stumble upon a cave and there discover hidden in a sealed stone jar a manuscript as old as, in fact older than, any yet known to the scholars. And suppose, after exhaustive research of the most rigorous kind, it were found to have originated in the very earliest of the "Jesus communities" of Palestine. Every indication is that its author or authors were eye witnesses to the words and events they report. And suppose that on deciphering the text it is learned that the true secret, the dark "messianic secret" of the Jesus movement, was not that Jesus had been conceived out of wedlock, nor that he had merely swooned on the cross and the "resurrection" was nothing more than a lucky recovery, not even that he was secretly married to Mary of Magdala. The real messianic secret was that Jesus was in fact Jesua.

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10. Hampson, *Theology and feminism*, 62.

11. Hampson, *Theology and feminism*, 62.

12. See Keith Ward, *Religion and revelation: a theology of revelation in the world's religions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 193.

The Christ was a woman. Judas' act of betrayal was not to tell the authorities where Jesus was that fateful night. They knew well enough already. It was to tell them that "he" was in fact "she". In fury at the deception they organised for her disposal. For all the reasons now divined by modern theologians this truth had to be suppressed at the time for fear that her message and meaning would not be heeded. But, after much debate, the community decided the story should be written down and securely hidden that the truth might not be finally lost but, one day, in the providence of God, might be found and take effect.

The scenario is fanciful. But the question of implication is not. Feminist theology is in the process of exploring the ramifications of just such a thought experiment. What would be the consequences for Christian faith and life were such a "discovery" to come to light? Would it spell the complete dismantling of Christian spirituality and relationship to God? It is not hard to see how startling changes could be argued for. Patriarchy would be ruled out immediately. All the implications presently drawn from male christology would have the gender signs reversed. God would be she not he, queen not king, mother not father, who sent her daughter not her son as her final unveiling. There would be no question of the authority of women in the church. The only issue would be whether men could share sacramental dignity with them. Headship in the family would, of course, be with women. It would be hoped that men might fare rather better under such a regime than has been the case for women in the present gender hierarchy. So we could go on.

Conservatives reject it outright. They are convinced it is the destruction of Christian spirituality. The incarnation in male form is no accident. It models the meaning of divinity. God cannot and has not become incarnate in female flesh. We must simply accept this "terrible mystery". Radical feminists agree and rest their case. The experiment proves it. Christianity can never be anything but fundamentally sexist. Abandon it. Some, who wish to remain both Christian and feminist, insist on facing the implications. If we cannot "speak of the Divine incarnated in a female body, 'truly God and truly female'," Julie Hopkins argues, then "Mary Daly was correct when she observed, 'If God is male then the male is God'."<sup>13</sup>

Others think the issue is a red herring. Jesus' sex is of no more importance than his height or ethnic origins when it comes to that about him which is significant *theologically*. For Anne E. Carr, feminist "women in the church insist that sexuality has nothing to do with

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13. Hopkins, *Towards a feminist Christology*, 85.

saviorhood".<sup>14</sup> Moderates make the point that, while God *could* have chosen to take human form in female flesh, given the circumstances of history at the time, it was expedient not to. Elizabeth Johnson maintains there is "a certain appropriateness...to the historical fact that he [Jesus] was a male human being. If in a patriarchal culture a woman had preached compassionate love and enacted a style of authority that serves, she would most certainly have been greeted with a colossal shrug."<sup>15</sup> Roy Eckardt is less sanguine. "It appears to me that in the light of the dreadful tale of male oppression of women, it would have made more sense in the long run for God to have sent a woman." "Was this possible?" he muses. But does not answer. "That is a problem for God rather than for us."<sup>16</sup> Maybe. But God does seem to have put the ball in our court for the moment.

#### RULE 4?

I want to push this experiment a bit further. To do so I need to make a theoretical digression into what George Lindbeck has called "the nature of doctrine". By doctrine, Lindbeck means "communally authoritative teachings regarding beliefs and practices that are considered essential to the identity or welfare of the group in question".<sup>17</sup> In a now famous argument, he compares three different interpretations of the nature of doctrinal statements and the way they function in the theological tradition.

The first he calls the "cognitive/propositional" theory. In this view doctrines function as "informative propositions". They are truth claims about objective realities. To speak of God incarnate in Christ means to conceive in mythical or metaphysical terms of the conjunction of divine and human essences in the one being, Jesus of Nazareth. Conservative theology often takes this position.

The second option Lindbeck calls the "experiential/expressive" theory. In this perspective doctrines are understood not as objective truth statements so much as symbols giving expression and form to religious experiences, attitudes and orientations. To speak of incarnation in this framework means to speak of the human experience of God carried to its highest pitch. If to experience God is to feel oneself absolutely dependent upon God (Schleiermacher), then, in Jesus Christ,

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14. Anne E. Carr, *Transforming grace* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984)187; quote in Eckardt, *Reclaiming the Jesus of history: Christology today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) 133.

15. Johnson, *She Who Is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 160.

16. Eckardt, *Reclaiming the Jesus of history*, 254, n. 17.

17. George A. Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine: religion and theology in a postliberal age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984) 74.

this experience reaches its most intense and perfect manifestation. A good deal of liberal theology follows this line.

While not dismissing the value of these perspectives on doctrine, Lindbeck himself favours a third option which he calls the "cultural/linguistic" theory. This model understands religion as a "comprehensive interpretive medium," that is, a symbolic or categorical framework through which human beings interpret their experience, understand their world, and order their lives. Religions provide communities with idioms – rituals, languages, stories, forms, ideas – to enable them to deal with whatever is regarded as most important in human existence, the "ultimate questions of life and death, right and wrong, chaos and order, meaning and meaninglessness".<sup>18</sup> Doctrines are the *rules* which govern the way the interpretive system works. To change the image, doctrines are to religious life what the rules of grammar are to the operation of language. They do not tell you what to say so much as describe the conditions under which anything that is said can make sense: "The novelty of rule theory...is that it does not locate the abiding and doctrinally significant aspect of religion in propositionally formulated truths, much less in inner experiences, but in the story it tells and in the grammar that *informs the way the story is told and used.*"<sup>19</sup>

A bald summary like this does no justice to the fascinating discussion which Lindbeck undertakes to illustrate and defend his thesis. But for my purposes it is sufficient. I want to explore how a rule theory of doctrine might assist in the feminist "thought experiment" on which I am embarked. How does Lindbeck's cultural/linguistic theory help deal with a theological interpretation of incarnation? The most significant gain over the other theories is that rule theory allows a clear distinction between doctrine and the terminology or conceptuality in which it is formulated. Thus the doctrines of Chalcedon, for example, can be said to remain in force in different linguistic and conceptual worlds provided the new expressions generate equivalent consequences in the revised context. The words and concepts may be different but the rules governing their use remain the same.

Lindbeck detects three basic "regulative principles" at work in the shaping of the classic doctrines of incarnation and the trinity. *Rule 1:* The monotheistic principle: there is only one God, the God of the Hebrew scriptures. *Rule 2:* The principle of historical specificity: the stories of Jesus refer to a real human being who was born, lived and died in a particular time and place. *Rule 3:* The principle of christological maximalism: "every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first rules". These principles reflect the implicit sense of religious self-understanding in the Christian

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18. Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine*, 40.

19. Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine*, 80 (italics added); see also p16; 30-39.

community from earliest times, Lindbeck argues. Their joint application to the various controversies that emerged in the course of time constrained the early believers “to use available conceptual and symbolic materials to relate Jesus Christ to God in certain ways and not in others”.<sup>20</sup> It is not hard to see how the application of these rules might work to the exclusion of the classic “heresies” of christology – docetism, gnosticism, adoptionism, arianism, nestorianism, and so on. By the same token, “what ultimately became Catholic orthodoxy was a cognitively less dissonant adjustment to the joint pressure of these three rules than any of the rejected heresies”.<sup>21</sup>

Here, then, is Lindbeck’s main contention: “if the same rules that guided the formation of the original paradigms are operative in the construction of the new formulations, they express one and the same doctrine”.<sup>22</sup> This means that terms and concepts used in discussing christology can change radically according to circumstance and need, while yet remaining faithful to the fundamental intention of the original impulse of faith.

I want to emphasise two points before applying this theory to feminist christology. First, the so-called “regulative principles” of doctrine are working principles that are only discovered in the process of theological debate. They are not known *a priori*. Rules of grammatical structure emerge from studying the way a living language works, not the other way around. Similarly, learning how to apply the story of Jesus to the ultimate questions of life is a process of trial and error, learned in the doing of it. Secondly, the rules are therefore, in principle at least, open to amendment, clarification, modification or addition. Further debate, deeper reflection, and new circumstances may lead to the uncovering of other regulative principles, consistent with the fundamental sense of faith that belongs to the community, but previously unsuspected or inadequately formulated.

As I said earlier, feminist theology has, in the matter of a decade or two, become influential on a world scale. No serious Christian thinking can ignore it. This means that increasing numbers of thoughtful Christians – genuinely “competent speakers in the Christian idiom” to use a Lindbeck-like phrase – are more and more convinced that the way we have been using christological language is inappropriate. It is “ungrammatical” in terms of the “feel” of the idiom. It seems to lead us to say and do things we don’t want to say and do as Christians, and not to say and do things we do want to say and do (see Rom 7:15!). And that, we feel, is not the way “the grammar” ought to operate. The original intention of christological doctrine – “that *everyone* who

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20. Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine*, 94-95.

21. Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine*, 95.

22. Lindbeck, *The nature of doctrine*, 95.

believes in him may not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16) – is badly obscured by the use to which christological language has been put in patriarchal contexts. In order to recover the original meaning of the Christ, attention must be given to the rules which governed the formulation of classic christological doctrine and see whether they are being appropriately applied in our new context of concern with gender justice, and also, whether the new context has led to the uncovering of modifications or additions which need to be made to those rules in order that the original intention might be made clear once again.

I want to argue that feminist theology, in the course of its controversy with established theology, has in fact brought to light at least one implication of and one addition to these regulative principles of christological doctrine. I will mention the implication briefly and then concentrate on the additional rule.

The implication. Lindbeck's second rule affirms historical specificity. Jesus was born, lived and died in real time and space. As a summary statement this is fair enough. I am not chiding Lindbeck for not developing it further. The important point is this: classical christology affirmed this rule, but applied it rather abstractly. The creed jumps from birth to death in the Jesus story – "Born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate". It says yes to time and place of birth and death. But completely neglects to say what *kind* of life Jesus lived in the time between. It is hard to avoid the feeling that in applying this rule the classic creed assumes that the life of Jesus is not of theological significance, at least not of the same order of significance as his birth and death. But this means that a crucial issue is neglected: what were the historical actions, words and alliances that resulted in Jesus being brought to the sorry condemnation of the cross? Why did he choose this path? Whom did he offend? Whom did he support? And why? Along with a number of movements in modern theology, including nineteenth century liberalism and twentieth century liberation theology, feminist theology insists that an implication of *Rule 2* is that the concrete historical details of the life of Jesus of Nazareth must be taken into *theological* account. It is not enough to say he was "true man". We must also say "and he was this *kind* of man". The sort of impact that this application of the rule has on shaping Christian understandings of God and of the "cost of discipleship" are to the fore in the feminist discussion of the historical Jesus.

More significant is the claim that a *fourth rule* should be considered in any contemporary christological debate. As a tentative formulation I put it thus:

*Rule 4:* Rule 3 may not be so interpreted as to yield non-equivalent theological consequences in relation to matters of gender difference.

Another, though less helpful, way of stating this rule would be to say that only those things may be claimed as *theologically* essential for Christ as could equally well be claimed for the “experimental” Christa.

Is this an advance? Does it not in fact introduce a false image – a hypothetical counter-factual as the logicians might say – into christological debate? The “scandal of particularity” in historical Christian faith seems to be that there *is* the male Christ and *is not* the female Christa. To try to balance the two things – one fact the other “thought experiment” – is in effect to turn the incarnation into a myth or mere idea. We could work out the meaning of christology simply by imagining an incarnation first in male, then in female form. Do we need either to be real? If we were stuck with the idea that doctrine is essentially propositionally formulated truth – was it this or was it that? – this criticism would be serious. But rule theory is not making ontological statements. It is advising how to draw appropriate *theological* conclusions within a Christian idiom from ontological statements. It is still possible, indeed necessary, to maintain that God was in Jesus Christ. *Rule 2* of the schema requires that. Real, historical, fleshly presence is demand by good christological grammar. But the question then is: what further theological conclusions can legitimately be drawn from this in the light of *Rule 3*? And this is where the Christa experiment helps to clarify things. Universalising *maleness* is a theological scandal. Whatever the “scandal of particularity” means, it cannot mean this.

This is not the first time issues of this kind have been faced by the church. Take the question of suffering and death. Jesus Christ suffered and died, and in an appalling manner. Does this mean that, because he is God incarnate, we must say God also suffered and died? Does a simple “as on earth so in heaven” rule apply here? The so-called “patripassianists”, those who believed that such rule does apply, argued that christology implies that since Jesus suffered the Father also suffered. Their opponents, sensitive to the fact that at very least it seems odd to say “God dies”, felt the reverse to be the better case. God does not suffer. The question is not: did Jesus suffer or not? The answer to that is not in doubt. The question is: what rules apply in drawing legitimate theological conclusions from this “fact”? In the course of history opinion has been divided on the matter. Those who held that suffering cannot be attributed to God tended to carry the day in earlier times. But the weight now seems to have shifted. “Competent speakers” of the Christian “language” now argue strongly for the “rightness” of speaking of a suffering God, or at least of suffering in God. The issue of slavery is similar. Where once slavery appeared to be an acceptable social organisation within a Christian framework, this is no longer the case. It is now universally agreed that

the rule against slavery has the weight of dogma. Christian faith and theology cannot be so interpreted that slavery remains an option within its horizon. In short, rules for the proper interpretation of the Christian idiom can change, develop and be refined in the course of debate aroused by new situations.

Feminists are not arguing that Jesus is an imaginary figure, easily "balanced" by an experimental Christa. Still less are they debating his gender. The Christa experiment simply forces the problem of gender equity to be faced squarely. The question in a cultural/linguistic framework of understanding doctrine is as always: what rules guide the theological use to which the basic story is put? Until recently much theology has, on the gender issue, simply assumed an "as on earth so in heaven" approach. The male image has been dominant and been used in a "grammatically careless" fashion in theological construction.<sup>23</sup> Now this unthinking application is under powerful challenge. Its operation leads to all the baleful consequences feminist theology has so carefully documented. It seems hard to resist the conclusion that the current way of doing and saying things is flawed. The rules need to be re-examined. Lindbeck's theory of doctrine provides a way of doing that without destroying the fundamental intention of the original story of incarnation. *Rule 4* as I have defined it suggests a way of making the appropriate adjustment. The first formulation is to be preferred to the second. While it is not as vivid or confronting, it also does not give the impression that it is reducing the christological question to one of myth or idea. Its character as a regulative principle is obvious.

#### CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY

What difference would the application of *Rule 4* make to christology? I believe it to be far reaching, and (obviously) in line with the best of feminist theology. A few pointers only can be given here. First, in relation to God and language about God: if incarnational christology – God was in Christ – allows us to speak responsibly of the "humanity of God" (Barth); and if this means it is appropriate to use anthropomorphic images to describe God and God's dealings with the world; and if we find it is fitting to use male models and call God "father", or "he", or refer to divine power as the "seed" of the world; then, by the operation of *Rule 4*, we must also be able to speak with equal legitimacy of God as "mother", or as "she", and to refer to her power as the "womb" of the world. And furthermore, to the extent that such images are limited and need to be qualified by the reminder that God is "beyond" gender – as indeed God is beyond all finite imagery – neither group of gender images holds analogical priority over the other. In

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23. There are, of course, counter images in the tradition which have a feminine interpretation of christological ideas, for example, Julian of Norwich, Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm, and so on. These counter examples are now being vigorously explored.

other words it is not more *nearly* right to speak of God as father than God as mother, or to use the masculine rather than the feminine pronoun. If a Logos (masculine) view of the incarnation is legitimate, so is a Sophia (feminine) interpretation. We can speak as meaningfully of Sophia-Christ, or wisdom incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, as of Logos-Christ or the word incarnate.<sup>24</sup> Theological equivalence is the regulative principle.

Similar kinds of change are implied if we turn the christological lens the other way and use it to examine the human condition. If it is said that divine grace in Christ is available to men, then it is equally available to women. This must include the grace of ordination as much as that of the forgiveness of sins. If Christ's call is to a servant ministry, it is a call for men as much as it is for women. And so on. What it boils down to is that all patriarchal interpretations of Christian discipleship are ruled out. I think this is exactly in line with the original intention of the doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. It "fits" the grammar of belief.

Application of *Rule 4* would lead to massive changes in Christian existence. It would change the theology, art, liturgy, politics, ethics, language, ritual and prayer of the church, and exactly in the way in which women (and many men) increasingly feel is essential if we are to be true to the inclusive salvation of God said to be offered to humanity in Christ.

Does it dismantle Christianity altogether as conservatives fear and radical feminists assert? Is the time of doing theology in a christological way over? I have tried to argue against such pessimistic conclusions. Feminist christology, I am convinced, can lead to the unleashing of a whole new vitality in the religion of the incarnation. Without pretending to anything like completeness, let me conclude by noting what of the basic structure of incarnational theology remains after the application of "*Rule 4*":

(i) The goodness of creation. The idea that the world is created by God *ex nihilo*, from nothing, and is declared by God to be "very good", carries with it the strong implication that everything that has being is valued. This includes our human lives. But the affirmation of incarnation is even stronger. It affirms God's thorough-going commitment to the creation in all its dimensions. And it reveals God's uncompromising resistance to all forces that work for the deflection of creation from its intended destiny in "the peaceable kingdom of God". The value of human life could not be maintained more strikingly than this. None of this is changed by *Rule 4*.

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24. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983); and Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is*, have explored this kind of christology in detail.

(ii) Matter and spirit. The covenant between God and creation is sealed by the presence of God in the physicality of Jesus. Once this is established there can be no defence of spiritualities that drive a wedge between matter and spirit, and favour the latter as "more God-like" than the former. Incarnational christology makes fun of us when we try to be more spiritual than God. None of this is changed by *Rule 4*.

(iii) Ethical seriousness. The ethical and political demands of religious life are inescapable. To know God and to do justice are one and the same. Both Hebrew and Christian scriptures make plain that there is no religiosity, at least none that interests God, without mercy for the suffering, liberation for the oppressed, recompense for the wronged, repentance for the wrong-doer. This emphasis, especially in relation to the suffering of women, is further strengthened by the action of God in Jesus Christ. None of this is changed by *Rule 4*.

(iv) Unconditional love. If there is a "more" in religion, a dimension that does go "beyond" the ethical without abrogating it, in the tradition of the incarnation it is the "more" of God's unconditional love. What is made clear in the life and death of Jesus Christ is that God's fundamental acceptance of the creation is grounded in the gift of love before it is measured by the calculus of deeds. Even when there is nothing we can do to help, or there is so much we have done it can no longer be helped, the divine "thou shalt" is mediated through the divine "thou art". None of this is changed by *Rule 4*.

(v) Inclusive salvation. The clear intention of christological doctrine is to affirm that the healing grace of God made present in history in the life and destiny of Jesus excludes none, at least none who do not intend to exclude themselves. God's actions are necessarily inclusive. As in creation, so in new creation, being itself is determined by the intentions of God. None of this is changed by *Rule 4*.

(vi) Resurrection. Death is always a religious matter. At least all religions have serious things to say about it in terms of their overall "idiom". The religion of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ asserts a togetherness of God with Jesus that is not broken by death. The cross of Jesus' involvement in the death of the world is taken up by Christ's resurrection into the life of God. This is a manifestation of the fundamental intention of God's purpose in creation. It is part of incarnational hope. None of this is changed by *Rule 4*.

Feminist christology can and will bring big changes to the church. They are changes that need to be made not because some "secular movement" demands them, but because they are called for by the truth intrinsic to the religion of the incarnation itself. Without them we are not telling the story of the gospel according to the "rules" that story demands.