



# Was Jesus a feminist?



**VICKY BEECHING**  
EXPLORES  
WHETHER  
CHRISTIANITY  
CAN SHED ITS  
PATRIARCHAL  
PAST

"I can't believe you waste your time with that patriarchal religious bullshit," a friend said to me with a mischievous, yet searingly honest, eye-roll. We were riding the London Underground after a catch-up coffee. She was headed home and I was

going to Evensong – a quiet service of reflection – at St Paul's Cathedral.

When I'd told my friend of my Evensong plans, she'd made that comment, shaking her head despairingly. As the Tube rumbled onwards, I gave her a friendly shoulder punch and stuck my tongue out in mock rebellion.

"I mean," she continued, in a more serious tone, "you're a feminist, Vicky. How can you square your feminist values with such a male-dominated faith? God is referred to as 'He' in

Christianity. Jesus was male, and the 12 Apostles were too. So were almost all of the well-known heroes of the Bible". She paused to take a mouthful of her Starbucks, then carried on.

"The Bible was written down by men. And the ancient councils – where all the major decisions were made about Church doctrine – were run solely by guys." Sipping more coffee, she concluded: "So, it's little wonder that resulted in a religion where women have played subservient roles for centuries. Why on earth would you want to be part of that?!"

The Underground pulled into St Paul's station. Assuring my friend we'd talk about it next time we met, I jumped off the Tube. Exchanges like those happen to me a lot – and all the more since I came out as gay in 2014. It baffles many people that I took a bold step and talked about my orientation, yet didn't reject the religion that, arguably, caused the shame and fear in the first place. Some saw that as "a job half done".

None of this offends me. In fact, I empathise with most people's reasons;

they are issues I've had to wrestle with myself, so it's a familiar path. I'll be the first to agree that Christianity has a terrible record when it comes to diversity and equality.

Some progress has been made in the Church of England recently – as of 2014 we now have female Bishops, which was a significant breakthrough. Unfortunately, much work still remains. LGBT equality is limping along with minimal signs of real change. Priests can't marry same-sex partners, and clergy in civil partnerships must promise to be celibate. Many churches around the globe still teach that being in a same-sex relationship, or being transgender, is "sinful".

Despite all this, I've come to believe that Christianity is not, at its core, misogynistic or homophobic. And that I can be a "feminist of faith" without sacrificing the integrity of either.

It's been quite a process to arrive at that belief, though. From a scan of the Bible, it seems extremely patriarchal. Reading the works of the Church Fathers who established Christianity in its formative years only solidifies this

view – some of them said horrendous things.

St Augustine wrote: "Women should not be educated in any way; they should be segregated." St Albertus Magnus said: "Woman is a misbegotten man and has a faulty and defective nature in comparison to his." Tertullian declared that women "are the gate to hell". No theologian today would say such things. Yet they were said and believed, many centuries ago, by these founding Christian thinkers.

The Bible, too, has its difficult-to-come-to-terms-with moments. Writers like Professor Phillis Tribble have shone a light on the darker stories in Scripture where women endured horrific suffering. Her book, *Texts Of Terror*, deals with this. She's right: we can't just ignore or sideline the difficult parts of holy books.

Despite all of this, I've glimpsed what I believe is the true heart of Christianity. And I've met many other Christian feminists who've found the same: the two can co-exist. "Ok, how?!" I hear many of you ask. There is a far more positive side to the story; it just takes some work to excavate it.

Yes, Christianity has been used as an excuse for patriarchy and oppression over the centuries, but it's also been a powerhouse of freedom for the marginalised. For example, the Liberation Theology movement, birthed in Latin America, where Jesus' teachings have been used to campaign against social injustice.

Jesus was actually very subversive and radical. He treated women in a jaw-droppingly positive way for his era and culture. In a setting where women, and especially foreign women, were seen as worth less than men, Jesus refused to play along.

One famous story describes him initiating a conversation with a Samaritan woman at a drinking well. The men around him were shocked to see him talking with her, but in doing so, he demonstrated that men and women were equal in his eyes.

After the crucifixion, the first

person to see Jesus after he came back to life was a woman named Mary. In the first century, a woman's testimony wasn't even valid in a legal court. Women's voices didn't count. But Jesus chose that the first witness to his resurrection would be female. He sent her to break the news to the male disciples, forcing them to hear it from a woman.

St Paul is often considered rather patriarchal. But he also wrote a powerful sentence in the New Testament that blows gender hierarchies apart: "There is neither 'male' or 'female' anymore because now all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Also, in one of his letters, St Paul praises a leader called "Junias" who's thought by many historians to, controversially, have been a female apostle.

All this seems like progress, but what about the fact that God is almost always referred to as "he"? This grates against gender equality because as the feminist theologian Mary Daly puts it: "If God is male, then the male is God."

Thankfully, God is beyond gender. Not a created being and not having a body, God is Spirit. However, despite this, it remains mainstream in Christianity to use "he" pronouns because the Bible sets this precedent.

There are a few exceptions to the rule. Feminine identity or characteristics are used to describe God several times in the Bible. God is described as being like a Mother in the Old Testament (Isaiah 66:13, 49:15, 42:14 and Deuteronomy 32:11-12). The Holy Spirit, the third member of the Trinity, is referred in the Hebrew language of the Old Testament as feminine.

One of the earliest Christian proponents of calling God "she" was a 14th-century Catholic writer called Julian of Norwich. Julian was totally ahead of her time, writing: "Just as God is our Father, so God is also our Mother."

Personally, I think it's unhelpful to use gendered language when referring to God. I believe God is the ultimate in non-binary identity. In the creation story of Genesis, God creates human

beings "in the image of God: male and female." On that basis, God's blueprint or "image" reflected in humans must encompass both male and female; the entire spectrum.

"God as genderless" is a much-needed message in a culture where we dearly need equal rights for trans and intersex people, and for society to grasp that gender is a continuum rather than fixed polarities. To extend Mary Daly's logic, I'd say that "if God is binary, then binary is God", so we need to move away from it.

So, there's a whistle-stop tour of Christianity and feminism. Granted, it might not look like the two easily marry at first. But if you dig into the most authentic DNA of Jesus and the movement he started, I believe it is one that values gender equality and stands against oppression of any kind.

Jesus defended the underdog and fought for the rights of the vulnerable. Yes, patriarchal influences have exerted themselves on Christianity, especially in its earliest centuries, and that has brought with it a male-dominated lens and heavily distorted views. But these can be scrubbed off and the true faith beneath can be excavated.

It's crucial that women – and LGBTQI women especially – find our place and our voice within faith communities. Because we have been marginalised and excluded, we need to reclaim our sacred texts. We need to rediscover the imagery and storylines within them that relate to our lived experience, not just to male identity and experience.

I've battled against the seemingly patriarchal overtones of Christianity to find the real meaning beneath. The journey hasn't been easy – and is still a work in progress. But for me, it's become a liberating faith, not an oppressive one. Faith and feminism might seem like an oxymoron – perhaps the unlikeliest of combinations – but for me, they now go hand in hand. **D**

@vickybeeching

PHOTO NICHOLAS DAWKES