

# Introduction

As a feminist and former atheist who stumbled into studying theology almost by accident, I will never forget my initial shock at encountering a Jesus in the Gospels with whom I was wholly unfamiliar. This Jesus had a revolutionary attitude towards women that not only transcended time and place, but was also strikingly at odds with the ethos of the Church in which I was brought up and from which I received my religious education. Roman Catholicism is without doubt the most patriarchal institution in the Western world. My theological journey quickly turned into a quest to find out how a first-century Palestinian Jew could relate to women in a way that obliterated all forms of sexism, including that perennial tool of oppression of the female sex known as the double standard. A related question that I also set out to explore was why the Roman Catholic Church's treatment of women contrasts so strongly with that of its founder.

While in the West (by which I mean Catholic and Protestant Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand) women have gained significant rights and freedoms in comparison to the women of other cultures, the recent #MeToo movement has demonstrated that we still have a long way to go. Indeed, it could be argued that the freedoms we have gained have brought us to a phase in our journey towards equality that permits deeper insights than were possible before into the structures of society that facilitate the sexual coercion of women. In addition, the relatively new discipline of evolutionary biology can shed light on how and why these structures have evolved. I came to the realisation that our hard-won freedoms, combined with new insights into the evolution of patriarchy, facilitate a perspective on the Gospels that reveals Jesus' treatment of women to be so unique it provides further persuasive evidence of his divine nature. I am now convinced that feminism as a movement could only have arisen in a Judaeo-Christian culture.

The book opens with a discussion of the way in which evolutionary biology, feminism and the #MeToo movement can expand upon the first three chapters of Genesis. This is followed by an analysis of how women are portrayed in the Old Testament as a preparation for detailed discussion in the following chapters about the contrasting manner in which the Gospel stories depict the relationships of Jesus with women. Following the latter analysis of the Gospel stories, there is a theological argument that Jesus' unique manner of relating to women was grounded in his divine consciousness, a consciousness that was permeated and illuminated by *agape* love, the form of love that is uniquely Christian. As a result, Jesus 'saw' all women in the fullness of their dignity and personhood. There follows a further discussion on how this greater theological understanding and awareness of the behaviour and consciousness of Jesus can guide the conversion experiences of Christians, male and female, and point the way towards a restoration of the harmony between the sexes described in Genesis. This is a theological path that will take us beyond feminism and political notions of 'equality' to the realm of relationships and the healing power of grace.

The book's closing argument is that in order for such a revolution of grace to occur, Christian women will have to reclaim their religion. Religions tend to be used as a force for the social control of women by reinforcing the patriarchal power structures that constrain them from attaining their full potential as persons. In the early Church, the role of women reflected their treatment by its founder, but the situation regressed when Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. In the book's concluding chapter, I cite the late great Diana, Princess of Wales as an archetypal example of why Christianity must be reclaimed by its female members.