


Article

# Contradictions, Contextuality, and Conceptuality: Why Is It that Luther Is Not a Feminist?

Else Marie Wiberg Pedersen 

Department of Theology, University of Aarhus, Jens Chr. Skous Vej 3, Dk-8000 Aarhus, Denmark; teoewp@cas.au.dk

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**Abstract:** It is the aim of this article to constructively discuss some of the feminist critique that has been raised against the sixteenth century reformer, Martin Luther, and concomitantly to demonstrate the complexity, and primarily liberal aspects, of his view of women. At its outset, the article points to the fact that there are many different types of feminism, the biggest difference existing between constructivist and essentialist feminisms. Having placed myself as a constructivist feminist with a prophetic-liberating perspective, I ponder how feminism as an -ism can again earn the respect it seems to have lost in the wider academia. I suggest that feminists nuance their use of strong concepts when assessing historical texts, viewing the assessed texts against the backdrop of their historical context, and that feminists stop romanticizing the Middle Ages as a golden age for women. In this vein, I point to the problem that many feminists make unsubstantiated and counterfactual statements based on co-readings of different strands of Protestantism, and that they often uncritically repeat these statements. I problematize, first, the psycho-historian Lyndal Roper's claim that Luther should have held some of the most misogynist formulations known, which is absurd against the backdrop of the misogyny found in the centuries before Luther, especially in medieval texts by the Dominicans /the Scholastics. Second, the claims of feminist theologian Rosemary R. Ruether's that Luther, like Calvin, worsened the status of women, which are counterfactual.

**Keywords:** feminism/s; Martin Luther; nuancing of concepts; contextualizing of texts; Lyndal Roper; Rosemary Radford Ruether

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## 1. Introduction: What Is Feminism?

How should one define feminism and feminist theology? What does it take to be a feminist or to be taken seriously as a feminist theologian? In short, when is someone a feminist? The Latin word root, *femina*, as a substantive, means woman, as an adjective female. So, does feminism solely relate to women/the female in the generic, and is it enough to work for improving the status of women in a given culture or society? These are pertinent questions as there—ever since women in the mid-nineteenth century began to more programmatically protest their inferior and marginal status in society and church—exist very different strands of feminism, some of them contesting each other's claim to "true" feminism. Though we know that women at different times through history have been fighting to get a place and space, we normally count three waves of more programmatic feminism, while discussing whether a fourth wave is taking place right now. However, even if we agree on three waves of feminism, different scholars will define and understand them differently depending on their background, strand, and context or continent. For example, the definitions of feminism by Anne Clifford (Clifford 2005, pp. 9–38) are grounded in a North-American context whose periodizing and categorizing of the three feminist waves differ slightly from those from a North-European context. Coming from the American context, Clifford categorizes the second wave as I, from a North-European context, would categorize the first wave feminism. Furthermore, she sets the beginning of the third

wave with the paradigm shift to the identity political focus on feminism around 1980, whereas I, in accordance with my North-European context, set the beginning of the third wave with the paradigm shift from women's studies to gender studies around 1990 (Wiberg Pedersen 2012, pp. 59–75). When it comes to feminist theology, the biggest distinction is probably that between a constructivist<sup>1</sup> and an essentialist feminist theology.

I prefer a broad definition and understanding of feminism as an –ism that as its goal has equality, equal worth and equal rights, of all people in a cosmological sense. My feminist view is located within the constructivist strain of feminism with its prophetic-liberating perspective of the Christian tradition (Ruether 2014, p. 83),<sup>2</sup> very much in contradistinction to the essentialist strain with an admonishing-moralizing perspective that in its radical form of post-Christianity claims that feminism and theology are incompatible.<sup>3</sup> Whereas the constructivist strain of feminism in general works from deconstructing petrified conceptions of the past and present, the essentialist feminism in general seems to work from constructing petrified conceptions of the past and present, whether Christianity or feminism. Daphne Hampson's version of essentialist feminism is a showcase of this (Hampson 1990, 1996, 2001), and there are ample reasons to warn against an essentialist feminism such as Hampson's. Not only does Hampson in the outset petrify Christianity in her own reductionist construct, she furthermore petrifies feminism as such (Ruether 1990, pp. 390–400). As she firmly denounces any form of heteronomy for what she sees as a truly feminist self, an autonomous self (e.g., Hampson 1996, pp. 88, 115), she in fact colonizes feminist theology (Kim 2005, note 69). With no room for feminist theology as intercultural discourse or contextual enterprise, Nami Kim with Kwok Pui-Lan warned against "indiscriminate appropriation and mindless borrowing" from other religious traditions (Kim 2005, pp. 75–96; Pui-Lan 2008, pp. 23–39). However, what particularly makes me bring up Hampson in this connection is that she expresses utter contempt for those women, mainly Protestant, who broke male monopoly on interpreting scripture and doctrine, and who in their own right interpret and employ the Christian message—also serving as clergy. To Hampson, the women who thus took up the legacy of prophetic liberty and equality of Luther and other sixteenth century reformers are automatically subordinate by serving their female virtues of motherhood, and she, self-contradictorily, contends that they joined the boys' club by being ordained (Hampson 1996, p. 204). What is noteworthy is that Hampson places this argument in a broader renunciation of Protestant theology that stands in stark contrast to her later positive attitude to Lutheran theology as it comes out in her *Christian Contradictions*. Yet, she—self-contradictorily again—about 100 pages earlier in the same book raises the question if not "transgressive practices (possibly even—within the realm of the church—ordaining women) themselves [can] bring about a theological and indeed also a social shift." (Hampson 1996, p. 105). The most spectacular self-contradiction is that Hampson's presumably positive view of Lutheranism builds on a static picture of a reform theology that understands itself to be always reforming (*semper reformanda*). Hampson confronts her static picture of Lutheranism with a static picture of Catholicism, freezing both to two stiff and undifferentiated paradigms that she perceives as just as incompatible as theology and feminism. In consequence, she dismisses any kind of ecumenical Christian theology in the same way as she dismisses any kind of feminist Christian theology (Wiberg Pedersen 2007, pp. 71–88).

To me, as a Lutheran feminist of the constructivist strain, it makes no sense to ignore or denounce the liberative aspects that are detectable in Luther's reform theology on account of simplistic criticism. Why ignore or criticize Luther's idea of the priesthood of all believers that eventually paved the way for women's ordination in most Lutheran and Protestant churches? Why ignore his radical incarnation

<sup>1</sup> Clifford names it reconstructivist, cf. Clifford (2005, pp. 33–38).

<sup>2</sup> I will come back to this article by Ruether below where I discuss some of the claims made by Ruether about Luther.

<sup>3</sup> The American (Catholic) theologian, Mary Daly, laid the ground for a post-Christian feminism and was followed by for example the British (Anglican) theologian, Daphne Hampson, who with no less fervor—and with much inconsistency—spelled out her radical separatist view.

theology that emphasizes Christ's humanness, not Christ's maleness, as well as God's coming to human beings as a human being? In my opinion, this is a prophetic-liberating perspective. Hence, it is my aim in this article to constructively discuss some of the feminist critique that has been raised against Luther and question its often very rigid and undifferentiated accusations against a reformer whose theology is very complex and whose view of women exhibits a very high degree of complexity. I take Rosemary Radford Ruether and Lyndal Roper as examples of a simplistic critique raised against Luther, because they are both widely read and their claims often uncritically repeated by others. The idea is to problematize the apparent lack of historical knowledge and context when feminists in general deal with Luther in conjunction with an un-nuanced employment of certain concepts, such as misogyny, often based on secondary sources. I believe that feminism will gain from bringing forth more nuanced research results based on original sources rather than stating categorical/moral judgements and condemnations based on secondary sources. For example, the same two formulations, taken out of context and not even from Luther's own pen, are repeated as evidence that he was the most misogynistic man in the world. One is from the Table Talks that reports Luther to hold that God gave women broad hips and men broad shoulders, the latter therefore better understanding wisdom than the former (Luther 1912–1921).<sup>4</sup> The other is from his lectures on Genesis (1535–1545) where Luther by his disciples is reported to have stated that post-fall "male to female is like the sun to the moon." (Luther 1883–2009, 2017a).<sup>5</sup>

Counter to these indictments, an in-depth study of Luther's letters and the Table Talks stated that Luther's view of women exhibits a high degree of complexity and cannot simply be dismissed as misogynist (Classen and Settle 1991, p. 254). My own close readings of seminal Luther texts have led me to the same conclusion. Hence, in this article, I intend to nuance the feminist gaze and allow for the changes and transformations to which Luther opened theology with his vision of Christian freedom and justice by way of hermeneutical and contextual readings of some of Luther's formulations and concepts criticized.

## 2. Contradictions and Concepts: Luther and Misogyny

In her recent book on Luther as a renegade, the feminist psycho-historian, Lyndal Roper,<sup>6</sup> wants to exhibit Luther's contradictions, and in order to do this she counters Luther's freedom principles with what she repeatedly labels misogynistic. What I find problematic is that Roper never defines what she means by misogyny, but instead seems to take it for granted that any articulation that can be interpreted as just remotely negative towards a woman, even when jokingly and humorously articulated, is misogynistic. In her introduction, she states,

"Here was a man who made some of the most misogynistic remarks of any thinker, yet who was in favour not only of sex within marriage but crucially that it should also give bodily

<sup>4</sup> Luther, WA, TR 2:285, no. 1975. Most references to Luther texts in this article will be to *Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimar Kritische Gesamtausgabe (hereafter WA) (Weimar: Herman Böhlau, (Luther 1883–2009)) which is the more original and more reliable edition. When revising English versions of Luther texts, I discovered that many misunderstandings of Luther's view of women and gender can be ascribed to these English versions that are rather conservative male interpretations than genuine translations.

<sup>5</sup> Luther, WA 42: 51. For a revised English translation of parts of Luther's lectures on Genesis that discuss Luther's perception of gender as well as takes account of Luther's own gender inclusive language in Latin (and German), see Wiberg Pedersen, "Lectures on Genesis 1:26–2:3," Stjerna, "Lectures on Genesis 2:21–25," and Stjerna and Pedersen, "Introduction to Lectures on Genesis 1:26–2:3 and 2:21–25," in *The Annotated Luther* (hereafter TAL) 6: 78–113, pp. 114–44, and pp. 67–77. Importantly, *The Annotated Luther*, vol. 1–6, gen. eds. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015–2017) aims for inclusivity with revised and fresh translations.

<sup>6</sup> In her different books on the Reformation, Roper projects psycho-historical pictures of Luther's person with little interest in the core theology, much in line with the pathological interpretations of his person made by his Catholic detractors and for which Johannes Cochlaeus, one of his most zealous opponents from early on, set the standard. I also note that Roper's references to Luther texts are inaccurate and in no way follow the academic norm, which I see as signifying an idiosyncratic and loose style.

pleasure to both women and men. Trying to understand this apparent paradox is a challenge I have not been able to resist.”. (Roper 2016, p. 11)

Later in the book, Roper deems Luther to at times “employ a misogynistic humour with women as well as men.” (Roper 2016, p. 300). She illustrates that by only one example: in a letter to the pregnant wife of Justus Jonas, Luther joked that she must be expecting a daughter because girls take up much space in the womb “just like their mothers, who make the world too tight for a poor man.” (Roper 2016, p. 300). And, yes, as a woman one may get tired of such jokes if they are constantly repeated. This is just one instance, however, in a private letter to a friend; and the big question is if such a humorous articulation to a woman who belongs to one’s circle of friends—and who with already four sons may have expressed her wishes for a daughter—is misogynistic.

As someone coming from a similar North European context as Luther, I read his remark as humorous and a mode of cheering up an anxious mother concerned about the sex of her child. In this vein, I want us feminists to consider how we use concepts and about what we use them, and ask if our own context brings or hinders something in the reading of texts stemming from another context (Roper 2016, pp. 12–16).<sup>7</sup> I suggest that we balance and nuance our use of strong concepts, such as misogyny. Calling even humorous remarks made in a circle of friends misogynistic might be counterproductive to the feminist cause. What then should we call serious expressions of hatred of women, some of them leading to the killing of women?

My understanding of misogyny within Christian culture regimes is most often based on certain interpretations of a limited set of biblical verses, as I will demonstrate below. Looming large are interpretations of the Genesis 2–3 text as a story about Eve’s (and any woman’s) deceptiveness and subsequent subordination and of 1 Corinthians 14:34, or its stricter parallel in the pastoral letters, 1 Timothy 2:12–15:

“I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.”

These verses were combined, the ban on women to teach being tied to Genesis 2–3, and used as a normative restriction regarding women’s role in the church, although the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the texts only gradually developed to a direct subordination of women. After periods of assimilation, where Christians followed the words of Galatians 3:28 (there are no more male and female) in an understanding of a spiritual sameness in Christ or of female transcendence where women, through an extremely ascetic life, effeminated themselves to obtain equal status with men, did this development take place. By the Middle Ages, subordination of women was fully developed, and female authors, such as Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), were confronted with the model and its specific philosophical argumentation from Aristotle, particularly from the scholastic theologians (Gössmann 2000, pp. 73–88). Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), Dominican monk and the most influential scholastic in Catholicism, built his view on women as innately inferior on a combination of Aristotle’s idea of women as “misbegotten males” and the biblical interpretation of Eve as the prototype of weak female nature. Hence, she is by nature “defective and manqué”; being less rational and less the image of God, she is subordinate to man and only needed for procreation (Goris 2011, pp. 67–73; Clack 1999, pp. 74–82); otherwise to be avoided “as a man avoids snakes.” (Clack 1999, p. 75).

<sup>7</sup> Lyndal Roper tells in her introduction to the book that she originates from a Reformed family in Australia, her father being a Presbyterian minister for some years, and the Reformed church in Australia was, for some strange reason, more related to Luther than to Calvin at the time. Interestingly, the Lutheran church in Australia is among the most conservative in the Lutheran “family.” Like the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church in the US, it is one of the few and still decreasing number of Lutheran churches that does not allow the ordination of women pastors.

During the sixteenth century Reformation and Counter-Reformation, Eve and her sex quickly became one of the significant battlefields, as Luther went against the rigid misogynistic regulations of women. The battle started around 1517, after Luther had promoted his idea of equality of all Christians. He was finally banned and sentenced to death by Pope Leo X in 1520 for 41 errors, among them ascribing “even women”—as the papal bull with dismay realized—the same power to give absolution to repenting sinners as bishops and pope (Denzinger and Schönmetzer 1963, p. 359).<sup>8</sup> Many seem stunningly unaware of that, as they seem unaware that Luther, like Erasmus and unlike the papal church, allowed women to study the Scriptures (Weber 1990, p. 21). Luther expressly opposed the rigid readings of the scholastics who expostulated a ban on women using Holy Scripture, with reference to 1 Corinthians 14:34. By contrast, the only time Luther mentions 1 Corinthians 14:34 explicitly is in a reference to his opponents. Luther draws a sigh how his Catholic opponents are always countering his doctrine on the priesthood of all believers, women and men, with Paul’s ban on women’s speaking in the church as a *sola scriptura* principle. The fact is that Luther finds this Pauline passage secondary to what is the primary cause: the actual preaching of the word. With a clear distance Luther therefore exclaims,

“... the papists expostulate with us Paul’s saying in 1 Cor14: ‘Women must keep silent in the community, it is not good for a woman that she preaches. It is not allowed for a woman to preach, but she must be humble and obedient.’ From that follows that preaching cannot be common to all Christians, namely not to women, to which I answer that they should let no dumb or otherwise unfit people preach... Besides, Paul raised women over men as prophets... And Paul himself, 1 Cor 11, taught women to pray and prophesy with covered heads. Thus, order calls for nurture and rather that women are silent when men speak. However, when no man preaches, then it is necessary that women preach.”<sup>9</sup>

In its fundamental sense of the word, misogyny (from Greek *misein* = to hate, and *gyné* = woman) means hatred of woman, and, yet, scholars have very different definitions of misogyny. David D. Gilmore has shown that misogyny is a universal phenomenon that cannot be confined to any particular period, culture or society. Rather, it “takes on some palpable form in any given society.” (Gilmore 2001, p. 9). This insight that misogyny is universal and permeates cultures at all levels was recognized by medievalists, particularly feminist historians of the 1960s and 1970s, who moved from viewing the period as a golden age for women. Historians uncovered evidence of medieval women’s declining status and identified a pervasively anti-female rhetoric that supported male dominance. They realized the gradual loss of power and authority that began in the eleventh century, peaked between the thirteenth and fifteenth century, and in fact continued into the early modern era. Scholars recognized medieval society and its institutions to be so oppressive for women that misogyny, in Bloch’s formulation, “runs like a rich vein throughout the breadth of medieval literature.” (Bloch 1991, p. 1). By the 1980s, medieval historians, such as Gerda Lerner, began to see women’s subjection as a result of patriarchy (Lerner 1986).<sup>10</sup> This terminology was soon regarded politically incorrect, though, while the term misogyny came to mean almost anything negative about women. This is then where we find Roper and many other feminists today—the more structurally directed term patriarchy has been replaced by the more linguistically directed misogyny. Misogyny, aside from the affective element of woman-hating it may contain, is a speech act distinct from doing something to women. I consider the mixing of the two domains a major problem for feminism and agree with medievalist Howard Bloch who emphasizes that “one has to be careful not to move too easily between the domain of institutions and the discourse of antifeminism.” (Bloch 1987, p. 9). Bloch lists a wide range of areas

<sup>8</sup> This was adduced as error 13 among the 41 “Errores Martini Luther” for which Luther was condemned and sentenced to death by Pope Leo X in 1520. I am astonished that even Reformation historians seem unaware of this.

<sup>9</sup> Luther, *Vom Misbrauch der Messe*, WA 8: 497–98. My translation.

<sup>10</sup> Gerda Lerner’s substantial work on the systemic subjugation of women was seen as provocative.

where social historians uncovered a “very real disenfranchisement of women in the Middle Ages.” Between the fourth and the fourteenth century, essential differences in men’s and women’s rights increased markedly—e.g., with regard to possessing, inheriting, and alienating property as also with regard to taxation and civil and legal rights, including punishment for the same crime. However, these should not be counted as misogyny but belong to the institutional domain and point to massively unjust societal structures. Bloch surmises that

“ . . . the risk, in neglecting the complicated series of intervening mediations, is entrapment in the movement of the very phenomenon one seeks to expose. The unqualified and unreflective equation of the two is tantamount to a ritual recitation of tort—yet another speaking or citation of the traditional topoi—that serves less to redress historical injustice than to naturalize it in terms of an ineluctable rule of relation between the sexes.” (Bloch 1987, p. 9)

Bloch seems to perceive any speech act, in which the subject of the sentence is a woman and the predicate a more general term, as misogyny (Bloch 1987, p. 22). I agree with historian Paula M. Rieder who recommends that we discern between different kinds of and levels of statements. Based on a diverse medieval clerical material, Rieder demonstrates that not all negative language about women should necessarily be identified as misogynistic, though it as an expression of the inherently patriarchal, feudal society is truly paternalistic and androcentric (Rieder 2012, p. 6). Like Rieder and Bloch, I recommend that we do not mix terminology related to the structural or institutional domain with terminology from the discursive domain. As Rieder states, “misogyny and patriarchy are not the same thing.” (Rieder 2012, p. 6). Like Rieder, and unlike Bloch, I maintain that there are levels of speech that are not directly misogynistic, and that we need to nuance our assessments and descriptions, according to sources and genres. Rieder may have a point when she asserts that clerics who use biblical language tend to use milder formulations, as much directed towards lay males as to females, than those clerics who create “their own linkage among women, sex, and pollution.” (Rieder 2012, p. 8).

Thomas’ degree of misogyny is subject to debate, but historians agree that a shift in the view of women took place during the eleventh century Gregorian reform when clergy was decreed celibate, not with the sixteenth century reformer, Luther. The Gregorian church institution began to associate women’s bodily functions with the dangers and pollution of sex and simply requested the clergy to dismiss their wives, concubines and children. The renunciation of sex became the signifier of male clerics’ ontological superiority and sanctity that should not be smothered with female impurity. In support of pope Nicolaus II’s orders of 1059, Peter Damian (1007–1072) denounced the clergy’s female companions, condemning them as “seducers of clergy, lures of the devil, scum of heaven, poison of souls,” lumping together all women as “prostitutes.” (Vauchez 2009, p. 185–88). When Lateran IV in 1215 introduced an annual confession for both sexes, women’s confessions posed a special problem to the celibate priests who had to avoid intimacy with the female penitent who was considered more sinful than the male. During the thirteenth century, clergy, especially the Dominicans, developed a penitential literature that was shaped after the seven deadly sins or the Ten Commandments. This literature perceived women harlots and adulterers (Hos 2:2), and, overall, focused on the female body associated with “the temptress” Eve. Even holy women, *mulieres religiosae*, including professed nuns (who were and are not ordained like monks, as some erroneously think), were forbidden to perform any kind of liturgical service. These women were *illiteratae*, not fully trained in Latin, and performed their theology in the vernacular, and, if they claimed an authority on par with the ordained male clergy, they had to be curtailed one way or the other (Wiberg Pedersen 2002, pp. 185–208). The late medieval penitential literature oozes misogyny on every side, as in the Dominican Pierozzi’s alphabet on women’s sinfulness, women called “avid animal,” “bestial abyss,” “concupiscence of the flesh,” and “mendacious monster” to take but a few from the list (Rusconi 2009, p. 217). With such views of women, I find it hard to follow Roper’s statement that Luther should be “a man who made some of the most misogynistic remarks of any thinker,” as noted above.

It is, however, a common feature of most male authors of the Middle Ages that they exhibit a certain ambivalence toward the female sex, poised between admiring and rejecting women. This also pertains to one of the most influential theological authors of the fifteenth century, the university chancellor in Paris, Jean Gerson (1363–1429). He worked for promoting certain women, primarily Christine de Pizan and Joan of Arc, whom he perceived possible vessels of God's grace, but generally discredited spiritual figures, such as Marguerite Porete (burned at the stake in Paris in 1310), Catherine of Siena and Bridget of Sweden. Convinced that devout women needed guidance from clerical men, Gerson wrote several works on the discernment of spirits meant for male confessors. He cautioned against female devotional excess by insinuating pretended visionary experience intended of seducing confessors into sexual sin, heresy, and diabolical delusion (McLoughlin 2016, p. 22). Likewise, Gerson extended a rigid interpretation of the interdict against female teaching to all forms of publication, oral and written. As women are easily seduced, detectable from Eve's having lied twice in her first utterance (Gen 3), so the conservative interpretation goes, all female verbiage must be carefully examined (Elliott 2004, p. 268; Weber 1990, p. 19).

Gerson's writings were used in the new literature composed by 1500 to find out which women were witches, foremost the *Malleus Maleficarum*, *The Witches' Hammer*, from 1484 by the Dominicans Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger. This is a scholastic compilation on the subject of witches, infamous for bringing together the misogynistic tradition from pagan culture and the Old Testament beyond Christian Antiquity, and gaining a most devastating impact. With biblical authority from Ecclesiasticus 19, women are defined as superstitious with "slippery tongues," preoccupied with "those things which by evil arts they know;" they are "more carnal" and therefore easier to deceive; they are creatures of desire, mainly carnal lust for sex, consorting with devils. The authors further propose the etymology that *femina*, woman, is derived from *fe minus*, lacking in faith (!) (Clack 1999, 83–90; Weber 1990, p. 20). In Brian McGuire's words: "The Dominican brothers and their inquisitorial successors were sure they knew the truth of women" when they determined women as insatiably lustful, therefore the origin of witchcraft (McGuire 2005, p. 343). But they were, beyond any doubt I would say, extremely misogynistic in their whole attitude.

In contrast, Luther wanted the domestic community to be "immune to the misogynist rantings of ancient and contemporary seers," as they were collected by Sebastian Franck (Karant-Nunn and Wiesner-Hanks 2003, p. 13). Against the backdrop of the tradition within which Luther was educated, and which he knew from inside—and that is the context in which we must read Luther's understanding of women/gender theologically, historically, and practically—he did not even come close to making as misogynistic remarks as some earlier writers. Only if one does not know how women were perceived and treated in the medieval, especially the scholastic, context, is it possible to make the contention that Luther made some of the most misogynistic remarks one can think of. I can even think of remarks by contemporary males that are much worse, seriously meant as they are.<sup>11</sup> It does not promote feminism if we make contentions that go against facts because we ignore important differences and nuances—whether regarding Luther and the tradition before him or regarding Luther and the Lutheranism after him. This also pertains to the question of Luther's view on women's authority.

### 3. Ambivalence or Ambiguity: Luther and Women's Roles

In an article from 2014, Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that the Augustinian view of woman as second in creation, while first in sin, and subordinate by nature, thus not permitted to exercise public leadership in society or the church "was inherited by the Magisterial Reformers Luther and Calvin in

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<sup>11</sup> I am not just referring to the so-called "incels", the involuntary celibates, who hate women whom, they claim, deny them sex, some having killed women for that strange reason. I refer to all the diverse extremist male groupings that have surfaced over the past decades and express their vehement hatred of women on various digital platforms.

the sixteenth century.” (Ruether 2014, p. 86).<sup>12</sup> Without substantiating this, she continues: “Luther and Calvin also worsened the early Christian tradition by denying that women can exercise the power of prophecy,” contending that Luther reinforces a patriarchal interpretation of God (Ruether 2014, p. 86). Ruether further contends that the Magisterial Reformation simply took over the view of the Scholastics, meaning that they abolished a more diverse and sacramental imagery for God for patriarchal language and reinforcing that the divine side of Christ perceived as the incarnation of God, thus representing God as masculine. Ruether, however, co-reads very different types of Protestantism as she clashes the theology professor Martin Luther, who started the Reformation in 1517, with the second-generation reformer, the jurist Jean Calvin, who did not enter the scene until 1534. Calvin no doubt fed from Luther’s reformation theology, but he was more conservative than Luther pertaining to the female sex. Calvin believed the female sex to be secondary in the creational order whereas Luther saw both sexes to be equal in creation, the female most excellent. Likewise, Ruether clashes Luther with later generations of Lutheranism, such as Lutheran Orthodoxy whose theology was far more conservative, as they wanted to prove their level of scholarship on par with Scholasticism.

The essay is a condensation of a book published in 2001 (Ruether 2001, pp. 88–101, 126–39), and it simply echoes the book, neither referring to Luther texts. Thus, when Ruether in 2014 still claims that Luther, like the Scholastics and Calvin, used Christ’s maleness to preserve female subordination, this becomes increasingly problematic. For she repeats claims that are both unsubstantiated and counterfactual. In fact, unlike the Scholastics and Calvin, Luther was not at all interested in the question of Christ’s maleness (Douglass 1991, p. 248); and in the well over hundred volumes of Luther’s writings, I have not found a single sentence where Luther refers to Christ’s maleness. This has the logical explanation that Christ’s sex is both christologically and soteriologically insignificant to Luther. *The* significant Christological and soteriological feature par excellence in Luther’s theology is that Christ took on humanness, and was born by a natural woman, downplaying Mary’s virginity.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, Luther constantly emphasizes that the Christian God is a God who wants to be known by humans as a human, and who can be known solely in the human being who is Christ incarnate. Hence, Luther can identify women with Christ and ministry as well as admit women political rule (cf. 1Tim 2:11–15) (Mattox 2003, p. 99).<sup>14</sup> Though one finds traces of patriarchal (Augustinian) ideas or of self-contradictory and ambiguous formulations in his texts, what is a striking feature is that Luther more often defends the equal and independent status of the female sex as *imago Dei* (Gen 1:27) and repudiates denigrating perceptions of women as malicious:

“This tale fits Aristotle’s designation of woman as a ‘maimed man’; others declare that she is a monster. But let them themselves be monsters and sons of monsters—these men who make malicious statements and ridicule a creature of God in which God took delight as in a most excellent work, moreover, one which we see created by a special counsel of God. These gentile ideas show that reason cannot establish anything sure about God and the works of God, but only thinks up reasons against reasons and teaches nothing in a perfect and solid manner.” (Luther 2017b).<sup>15</sup>

Counter to Thomas, Luther regards it absurd to see Eve/woman as the lower part of reason from creation and views women’s subordination as simply a post-fall disordering of human relationships.

<sup>12</sup> The essay is a condensation of Ruether (2001, pp. 88–101, 126–39). I will refer only to the essay, which simply echoes the book, neither referring to Luther texts.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Luther’s sermon on Galatians 4:1–7, WA 10.1.1.: 355–56, where he firmly states that Christ was born by a woman and therefore became a true human being, “a natural human” (German: *natürlicher mensch*) and a child of humanity (German: *menschen kind*). Let me warn against the English interpretation of Luther’s Lectures on Galatians (1535) found in *Luther Works* 26, which erases or obscures Luther’s gender-inclusive, or neutral, language. Cf. Streufert (2019, pp. 103–17, especially 110–11).

<sup>14</sup> This contradicts Ruether’s claims in (Ruether 2014, pp. 86–88).

<sup>15</sup> Luther, “Lectures on Genesis (1535–45),” TAL 6: 98–99; cf. WA 42: 41–62.



According to Jane Douglass, there are no indications that he found Eve intellectually weaker than Adam (Douglass 1991, pp. 236–37), while some claim that this only pertains to the just quoted lectures on Genesis from 1535 to 1545.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that the texts attributed Luther at times render the standard norm of male authority over women. But it is also true that he was prone to change his views (Douglass 1991, pp. 236–37), and a closer look at the relevant texts shows that they contrary to the general opinion, when studied in extenso, rather teach the mutual and equal partnership of women and men (Wiberg Pedersen 2010, pp. 190–200). This is substantiated by his practice when relating to women, both in the way he addresses women in his correspondence and in the way he affectionately relates with his wife, Katharina von Bora from 1525 and through their married life (Treu 1999, p. 158, 170–74; Stolt 1989, p. 287). German scholar, Martin Treu, who studied the historical and social circumstances around the Luther couple, importantly emphasizes that the often quoted Table Talks, written from samples of notes taken by others several years after Luther’s death, reveal that “the note-takers show clear resentments against Katharina” and no less against Luther’s openness to her and the female sex (Treu 1999, pp. 156–78).

Indeed, a close reading of the reformer’s texts in many different genres with their many different addressees reveals a high level of complexity and nuances, including what allegedly appears as inconsistencies and self-contradictions. I have earlier seen these inconsistencies and self-contradictions about women and the female sex as expressions of the same ambivalence that we witness in the tradition before and after him (Wiberg Pedersen 2010, pp. 190–200). I also stated that further investigations of Luther’s texts—terminologically, hermeneutically, rhetorically, and intertextually—were needed (Wiberg Pedersen 2010, p. 198). I thereafter did further in-depth studies of seminal Luther texts in conjunction with contextual analyses, which have led me to see Luther’s apparent inconsistencies and self-contradictions in quite another light. Rather than being ambivalent like the tradition before and after him, I see Luther as being intentionally ambiguous after the double ban on him from 1521 (Wiberg Pedersen 2019, pp. 4–22).<sup>17</sup> One thing is that Luther very well may have changed his views over the long period between 1517 and 1546, wherefore, for example, his exegesis of Genesis published in 1527 may vary from that published after 1546. Another thing is that we within the very same Luther texts, such as his *On the Councils and the Church* (1539), find contradictory formulations pertaining to ministry of the word and the female sex. In this text, Luther oscillates so much between highlighting the ministry of the word as the function of any human being and exempting women (plus children and unfit people) from preaching, unless in emergency situations, and then again uplifting the qualifications of girls/women to read and teach Scripture that it can hardly be arbitrary.<sup>18</sup> Hence, I contend that Luther, who since 1520 was more than aware that his ideals collided with the real politics of his day, made some strategic deliberations pertaining to his powerful opposition and employed the dialectical method of ambiguity when commenting on women’s role with regard to his reform theology. Rather than viewing Luther’s anthropology as primarily bad, I now see him as trapped between his own liberal ideas and the traditional ideas of a patriarchal society and church that included many of his students and co-reformers (Wiberg Pedersen 2019). In my opinion, all the quotations and examples that I give in this article point to a Luther far more positive toward women than tradition and his peers allowed, but also a Luther grappling with how to give women more space in this situation.

As, yet, an example of his more positive view, it is important to note that Luther did not command monasteries closed, as various feminists constantly claim. Luther advocates freedom—freedom of choice and freedom of conscience—for all. This has two important consequences for girls/women. First, if we read his theological and sociological argumentation with diligence, it is clear that his main

<sup>16</sup> Luther, TAL 6:181. Different from Douglass, some maintain that Luther held the opposite view in his sermons on Genesis (1527), and if one agrees with that view, one can either state that he contradicted himself, or that, at least, he allowed himself to change his mind.

<sup>17</sup> In this latter article, Wiberg Pedersen (2019), I have demonstrated some of the points made below in much more detail.

<sup>18</sup> Luther, *Von den konziliis und kirchen*, WA 50: 33.

purpose was to stop a system that served the rich elite, foremost the nobility who used convents as somewhere to place their surplus daughters at half the normal dowry without consideration for the girls' free choice or education (Ozment 1983, p. 6; Treu 1999, pp. 158–59). This was his reason for supporting those women who wanted to leave their convent as it was his reason for supporting those women who wanted to stay in their convents. An important illustration of that is that he, counter to numerous contentions, had his close ally, Philipp Melanchthon, come to the aid of the abbess of the Saint Clare's convent in Nürnberg, Caritas Pirkheimer, when the city's magistrate converted to Lutheranism and demanded all monasteries closed (Betzel 2016). By way of creative ambiguity, Luther left the question of women and ministry open to develop in due time. It was too dangerous a question to expand on, as proven by the papal bull in 1520, the emperor's ban in 1521, and the inquisition's punishment of even nuns who dared to teach the Bible. The latter danger only increased after 1517. For example, the Franciscan sister, Isabel de la Cruz, was condemned and severely punished for being "Lutheran" by teaching the Bible in the 1520s. Later, the Carmelite nun, Teresa of Ávila, was scrutinized for the same, and her writings were not published until after the inquisition's censure was finished in 1610 (Weber 1990, p. 27).

Second, Luther intensively advocates free, public education of all children, girls and boys, to facilitate a citizenship who can run society competently, much different from the monastic schools that were non-public and directed at the rich elite.<sup>19</sup> This was far from a worsening of the situation for the female sex as postulated. According to in-depth research in the matter, Luther's reform wishes addressed a situation where only one percent of the German population was literate and his postulation of a school reform with emphasis on female education by Protestant authorities had very positive effects, with a considerable reduction in the gender gap in adult literacy of later generations, distinct from Catholic areas (Becker and Woessmann 2008, pp. 777–805).

In the same vein, it should be noted that Luther's critique of monasticism was tightly connected to his critique of the way celibacy during the previous centuries had gained supremacy over the other estates, that of married people and that of the single or widow who did not live a monastic life. His critique was foremost directed at the expressed contempt of the natural (especially a misogynist contempt of the female) body and the concomitant denigration of women's status (Appold 2006, p. 263; Kraus 2011, p. 131; Stjerna and Pedersen 2017, p. 70). It did not aim at reducing career possibilities for women. Thorough studies of the new Lutheran married clergy that evolved have proven that they were "integrated into a group that had increased tremendously in significance as non-noble instrumental agents," now fully becoming burghers (Schorn-Schütte 2000, p. 12; Dreyer 2017, pp. 279–318). Many of them were former "celibate" Catholic clergy who had been living illegitimately with concubines and children that now came to live a legally married life with recognized wives and children, as their wished for family life was not set aside for the demand of celibacy. Both Luther and Katharina voluntarily left celibate lives—he a former Augustinian friar, she one of the twelve Cistercian nuns who fled from an involuntary cloistered life. We know from their married life that Katharina was not a suppressed housewife, but a most industrious businesswoman who besides running a large household as a hotel, was a landowner, a brewer, and a gardener. On top of that, she took part in the debates at the table. All in all, the Luther couple were partners. The new type of married clergy came to contribute to the middle class, or if you prefer bourgeoisie, that evolved in European societies since the thirteenth century and who wanted their children, girls and boys, to receive education. Carter Lindberg formulated it quite to the point: "Luther developed the office of parenting not only in the catechisms, but also in his writings on education as an instrument for change." Luther therefore demanded "priority of the estate of 'parenthood' over other estates in the interest of community." (Lindberg 2004, p. 40; Wiberg Pedersen 2017, pp. 213–34).

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<sup>19</sup> See Luther, *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation von des christlichen Besserung* (1520), WA 6: 381–469; and *Eine Predigt, dass man Kinder zur Schule halten solle* (1530), WA 30.2: 522–88.

In continuation of this, it should not be ignored that Luther actually theologically valued non-clerical work. His valuation demonstrably had the positive, practical effect that women were integrated in official church life from at least 1523, with tasks such as midwives, deacons, and teachers. All these professions were, on Luther's initiative, theologically underpinned and institutionalized as paid professions. It is important to notice that the midwives even functioned as a kind of substitute for the pastors, assigned as they were to proclaim the word of God and to baptize in circumstances of urgency; the female deacons did professional work for poor and sick people; and the female teachers were assigned to teach all disciplines alongside male teachers (Appold 2006, pp. 255–61). But not least important, Luther's doctrine on justification and radical incarnation theology meant a reconfiguration of ecclesiology and ministry. This becomes clear in the texts where he explicates his idea of the priesthood of all believers in stark contrast to the papal church's understanding of a special, holy office. Not only does he state that Christ has chosen all Christians to the ministry of the word and "given all the authority and power to assess and judge, to read and preach"<sup>20</sup> through baptism. He also denounces a sacramental understanding of a special ordination ritual, and discards the claim that ordination should endow the priest with a new sacred and indelible character (*character indelebilis*).<sup>21</sup> For to Luther, to claim a special holiness that divests laypersons, even nuns (!), of the altar is a childish trick:

"It is but superstition that nowadays puffs it up as a big thing if a layperson touches the chalice itself or the cloth going with it. Not even nuns, holy virgins, are permitted to wash the altar cloth. Look, for God's sake, how much this ordination's sacrosanct sacredness has proliferated! I expect that in the future laypersons will be allowed to touch the altar only when they offer money. On my part I'm about to explode when I think of these most horrific people's impious tyranny, when I think of how they deceive and destroy the liberty and glory of Christian faith by way of such childish tricks."<sup>22</sup>

These are very important steps taken, from which Lutheran/Protestant societies in Europe later benefitted hugely, even if there were backlashes made by diverse city and town magistrates or others who were not as progressive as Luther himself. The reaction of other movements or later generations should not, however, completely overshadow the positive implications of Luther's most positive teaching pertaining to women's roles. As Luther reconfigured ministry according to his radical incarnation theology, he firmly repudiated the late medieval identification of the apostolic succession with an unbroken line of male priests, and he never recurred to the maleness argument regarding Christ and the disciples. In Luther's understanding, Christ is radically God/the Word incarnate as a human for the sake of humankind, not male for males. This is not simply an indication. Luther goes the whole way, fully including women in the ministry of the word. Counter to tradition, he openly empowers women with the act of preaching, especially "where no men are present . . . such as in convents." Luther is adamant that here "a woman should be chosen among them to preach."<sup>23</sup> I find it hard to see how this worsens the situation for women.

Luther's reconfiguration of ministry as a human function among humans, concurrent with his radical incarnation theology,<sup>24</sup> had enormous theological consequences, as realized by his opponents. It meant a humanization of the church and a sacralisation of humans' everyday life with work, family and neighbours. Therefore, it must be stated that Luther's repudiation of the scholastic interpretation of 1 Cor 11:7 and 14:34, according to which canon law justified the cultic impediment of human femaleness by women's lack of creational *imago Dei* (Børresen 2015, pp. 243–68), contrary to Roper's

<sup>20</sup> Luther, *Vom Misbrauch der Messe*, WA 8: 496.

<sup>21</sup> Luther, WA 46: 133.

<sup>22</sup> Luther, *De captivitate Babylonica ecclesiae praeludium*, WA 6: 566. My translation.

<sup>23</sup> Luther, *De instituendis ministris ecclesiae*, WA 12: 180. Cf. WA 6: 484–573.

<sup>24</sup> Luther, *Paulus ad Galatas Commentarius*, WA 40.1: 59.

and Ruether's claims, eventually had very positive implications for women's position in church and society at large (Wiberg Pedersen 2015, pp. 224–32). While Aquinas, Bonaventura, and Duns Scotus argued for exclusive male ordination from the viewpoint that women as subjected to males from creation were unable to signify Christ's male eminence and authority, Luther never recurs to such arguments. To the contrary, the reformer predominantly uses gender-neutral language when defining church ministry, and we find but a few instances where he more specifically addresses women's public preaching—all turning out self-contradictory and ambiguous on a closer examination. Thus, Luther never quotes Paul's ban verbatim and his few references to it are neither insistent (except perhaps when reproaching the Anabaptists' speaking in tongues),<sup>25</sup> nor are they consistent. To be true, the reformer constantly contradicts those formulations that can be understood in a restrictive way and seems to intentionally have chosen the strategy of creative ambiguity for later generations to make their own reforms as they may suit their context (Wiberg Pedersen 2019, pp. 4–22).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

I have here tried to demonstrate that the Reformation did not mean a backlash for women and women's place, as many feminists seem to think. I suggest that we, in order for feminism to be taken seriously in all quarters of academia, should nuance our use of concepts, such as misogyny, and our critique of patriarchal power structures. We should, of course, go on highlighting women's important roles in the course of history, but we should not do that by romanticizing the Middle Ages as a golden age for women's role and esteem in church and society. It is true that some women, chiefly from the elite, stood out and have given us an invaluable material to work with. But it is also true that they often did that under severe circumstances and far from out of voluntary choices or within their own supreme power. The famous Hildegard of Bingen was given as tithe to the church, all convents were under male jurisdiction and had male chaplains and confessors, no religious women were allowed ecclesial authority while many of them were suspected of heresy, and some, like Margarete Porete were burnt for their beliefs. The vast majority of medieval women, however, are left in oblivion. Against this backdrop, I furthermore suggest that we study Luther's view of women and the female sex in detail from a constructive perspective in that we look for and highlight the liberating features useful for our feminist perspective. Not to deny the traditionally patriarchal features, but to lift up the liberating aspects that are much more prominent in Luther's thinking and that point away from conservative, essentialist ideas about women and gender roles.

The question why Luther is not a feminist is therefore rhetorical in this context. Feminism was of course not an -ism in its own right when Luther lived and acted, and, even today, it is not on the agenda in many corners of the world. Yet, if we consider the steps Luther took counter to his contemporary church and society, refusing to recant his egalitarian ideas even when facing a death sentence, he was a kind of feminist whose ideas opened avenues to women over the next centuries.

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<sup>25</sup> Luther, *Von den Schleichern*, WA 30.3:524.

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