

TIME FOR A NEW FEMINISM?

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(Mrs Nash argues that modern feminism has corrupted and obscured an ongoing need within modernity for the fostering of the dignity, duties and rights of women. She is a young mother of two and author of popular novels set in Malta, published by Progress Press.)

*“This is my body which will be given up for you.”
“My body, my life, my right to decide.”*

There can be no two sayings more different in meaning and more telling than these. More than any other quotations I could have chosen to begin this article, the words of Christ against the well-worn feminist slogan reveal the unhappy truth that the ideology of radical feminism remains diametrically opposed to the basic tenets of Christianity.

The difference of vision appears irreconcilable - the one looking out of a window, the other looking in a mirror. Ironically, radical feminism exalts the female body but in a manner that is almost a demonic parody of the Theology of the Body, with its selfish, nihilistic mantra of 'my body, my choice, my satisfaction' so far removed from the emphasis on love and self-giving within the Catholic faith. The now virtually unknown beliefs of the early feminists - that men and women are born equal, with equal dignity and equal rights - have been distorted beyond recognition into a destructively self-seeking agenda that all too often comes across as aggressive, heartless and self-pitying.

Tragically, radical feminism has done women a disservice. Lack of honesty has damaged the credibility of feminism, from the deliberate caricaturing of Catholic teaching to the denial of the scientific reality of the unborn child's humanity. As an activist, I have all too often been forced to listen to conspiracy theories about the Church's opposition to abortion and contraception, from literature stating that "The churches, especially the Catholic Church, teach that sexuality is something bad,"² and that "sexuality is something dirty and impure, only allowed for men"³ to rumours that the 'anti-choice lobby' (far be it for abortionists to accept the sincerity of the pro-life position) are being funded with millions of pounds from the Vatican's burgeoning coffers. When it comes to the unborn child, the ample evidence that reveals the humanity of the unborn, such as pain responses, a beating heart and clear 4D ultrasound scans, are simply ignored or dismissed.

The few feminists, such as Ellie Lee, who have the honesty to admit that abortion involves an act of killing have revealed the morally repulsive reality of contemporary feminism - that women are essentially entitled to do what they want devoid of any moral responsibility, even kill a baby if it gets in their way. "What did he reckon pregnant women who have abortions think they are carrying? A frog? A baby pig?" Dr Lee famously said of a SPUC spokesman in the media furore surrounding the 4D ultrasound images. "Pregnant women who have abortions (and those of us who unreservedly support their right to do so) do know that fetuses are human."⁴ A representative of

¹ See also www.faith.org.uk

² Las Dignas, *Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Central America*.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ellie Lee, *The Trouble with 'Smiling' Foetuses* Pro-Choice Forum, 13 September 2003.

BPAS at a Cambridge Forum debate in 2001 blurted out to a stunned audience: "Look, there is no happy ending for a foetus in an abortion, we kill it. That's our job."

Within the Church, feminists have come across as petty and self-pitying, bickering over all inclusive language as though intelligent women are likely to feel personally wounded every time the word 'man' is used to refer to humanity. The tendency to portray women as the victims of a patriarchal Church has become so entrenched that when journalist and broadcaster Joanna Bogle wrote a parody of this particular attitude within Catholic feminist circles, the Catholic Women's Network published it in their newspaper thinking it was real.⁵

THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN BY WOMEN

One of the bitterest ironies of radical feminism is the way in which women who refuse to accept this ideology of womanhood are openly bullied and vilified or at the very least patronised. At a recent meeting of the National Association of Women's Organisations in London, Mary Honeyball MEP attacked fellow parliamentarian, the 'notorious' (and absent) Anna Zaborska for being 'a right-wing Catholic' who 'doesn't believe that women have any reproductive rights.', [i.e. she opposes abortion and contraception.] Other delegates bemoaned the existence of 'anti-women women' who were clearly not on the side of their own sex because they opposed an apparently non-negotiable vision of sexuality. Feminists for Life of America⁶ are persistently attacked for 'masquerading as feminists' because they oppose abortion and embrace the vision of the early American feminists, who saw abortion as yet another way in which men brutally oppressed women.

Women who oppose abortion as a matter of conscience have become little better than the heretics of the women's movement to be marginalised, attacked and silenced by the very people who claim to speak and campaign in their name. As Mary McAleese puts it in *Swimming Against the Tide*:

"The myth that to be feminist is to be pro-choice has forced many women to resign from the name of feminism, to settle back bruised into the silence of the margins, victims of a new colonisation of the intellect. Why feminism should appear to be so uncomfortable with diversity and even conflict within itself on this issue is probably due more to its relative immaturity as a political and social force than anything more formidable."⁷

Whereas I would agree with McAleese that radical feminism has reached levels of despotism in its silencing of dissents that would be branded patriarchal and even fundamentalist coming from any other movement, I am not wholly convinced that it can be dismissed as mere immaturity. Feminism is certainly a relatively new movement but the forces behind the silencing of women have been too aggressive and too calculating to be explained away so easily. And the effects have been devastating both for society and - ironically - for the advancement of women.

TURNING A BLIND EYE

It is ironic that abortion, regarded as an evil by the early feminists,⁸ should have become a weapon, not only to silence dissent within the feminist movement, but to paralyse any significant resistance

⁵ Joanna Bogle's account of how she came to write the spoof can be found here:
http://www.wad2000.com.au/articles/2004/jul2004p5_1668.html

⁶ <http://www.feministsforlife.org/>

⁷ *Swimming Against the Tide: Feminist Dissent on the issue of Abortion* ed. Angela Kennedy (Four Courts Press, 1997) p.5.

⁸ American feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, wrote in 1873: "When we consider that women are treated as property, it is degrading to women that we should treat our children as property to be disposed of as we see fit." Quoted in *The American Feminist* Autumn/Winter 2003-2004 p.25.

to injustices facing women that involve abortion. China's coercive one-child policy has been described as 'the greatest bioethical atrocity on the globe'.⁹ Through the implementation of this policy, the Chinese authorities - with the co-operation and support of western aid agencies such as UNFPA¹⁰ - have interfered with the most intimate aspect of women's lives and deprived women of their fundamental human right to family life. Since its implementation in 1979, millions of women have been forced or coerced into undergoing sterilisation and abortion, threatened - along with their families - with financial ruin, loss of employment, imprisonment, torture and the destruction of their homes if they commit the crime of bringing 'unauthorised' children into the world.¹¹

Those who campaign in China against this barbaric policy have been brutally silenced. To name just two; Chen Guangcheng,¹² a blind lawyer, has been jailed and subjected to severe beatings whilst in prison for exposing atrocities carried out in the name of China's family planning laws. Mao Hengfeng,¹³ whose crime was to petition the authorities for justice after she was forced into an abortion, has also faced jail and been put to torture. This is an issue of paramount importance to those who campaign for women's rights, there can be no worse atrocity against a woman than to be forcibly aborted or sterilised, but the silence on this issue is deafening.

Another elephant in the room is sex selective abortion, a practice that is widespread in many parts of the world including China and India, but increasingly among some communities living in western countries. There are an estimated 60 million 'missing' baby girls in Asia alone, with hundreds of thousands of baby girls aborted every year.¹⁴ The consequences of this fatal discrimination against women are devastating, not just for the baby girls whose lives are lost, but for those who survive to reach adulthood. The gender imbalance in some regions of India and China is so serious that there are villages where no girl has been born for years. A healthy sex ratio should be 950 girls to 1000 boys (allowing for the fact that boys are more likely to die in infancy). Every region of India shows a significant gender imbalance, with the figure as low as 300 girls to 1000 boys in the Punjab.¹⁵

The results of this demographic disaster for women are already becoming evident, with the increase in sexual violence and exploitation of women through rape, wife-sharing, baby smuggling and sex trafficking. Dr B. S. Dahiya, a government official, has given the stark warning: "Violence against women is rising. We'll have more unnatural practices, such as brothers sharing a wife. In a few years, no woman will be safe. There will be abductions and rapes, even of minors."¹⁶ Some groups, such as ActionAid are beginning to speak openly about the dangers of sex selective abortion [ibid.] but remain evasive when it comes to talking about the chief problem - abortion itself- and tend to talk in more general terms about needing to change cultural prejudices such as the need for a dowry. At the same time, women such as Ann Furedi, director of BPAS (the UK's leading abortion provider and promoter) insist, in the name of women's rights, that it is necessary to accept the 'choice' to abort a baby for the crime of being a girl.¹⁷

The tragedy of maternal mortality is bandied about by many women's groups and aid agencies as a reason why abortion needs to be available on demand in developing countries when the bare

⁹ Wendy McElroy, *US Should Stay out of UNESCO* 24 September 2002.

¹⁰ Steve Mosher *The Case against UNFPA Funding* Population Research Institute, 11 January 2002.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Human Rights in China www.hrichina.org .

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Population Research Institute, *Infanticide, Abortion Responsible for 60 Million Girls Missing in Asia* 13 June 2007.

¹⁵ Action Aid, *Disappearing Daughters* 2008.

¹⁶ Amrit Dhillon, *Brothers are sharing the same woman* ,The Times, 23 June, 2004.

¹⁷ Ann Furedi *How We Can — And Should — Explore Ethical Concerns About Abortion While Remaining Committed to Women's Needs*. Hard Choices, Autumn 1999

medical facts do not reveal any palpable link between abortion and the reduction in maternal mortality. In 1992, Ireland's foremost gynaecologists issued a public statement in which they affirmed that "there are no medical circumstances justifying direct abortion, that is, no circumstances in which the life of a mother may only be saved by directly terminating the life of her unborn child."¹⁸ Childbirth is rendered safe by a range of interventions, such as trained birth attendants, good sanitation, the availability of powerful antibiotics and blood transfusion, caesarean section and adequate pre- and post-natal care. None of these interventions are unethical but the ideology of abortion for all is drawing attention away from the advancement of genuine, vital medical care for pregnant women. The approach to maternal healthcare is so skewed in favour of providing abortions that an organisation such as MaterCare International, a charity run by Catholic gynaecologists and obstetricians, has been denied funding for its vital work providing maternity care in developing countries because of its refusal to provide abortions.¹⁹

THE NEED FOR WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

The temptation when faced with the hypocrisy and extremism of radical feminism, is simply to dismiss feminism out of hand. However participating in a (not unjustifiable) backlash is not an answer in a world where the status of women remains unacceptable in many countries. To add to the injustices I have already described, worldwide, the overwhelming majority of rape cases are never reported to the police, largely due to inaction or hostility on the part of the authorities. In South Africa the reporting rate is thought to be as low as 3% of cases, but even the United States, which has the highest reportage rate in the world stands at only around 16%.²⁰ In Britain, of the tiny minority of cases that are ever reported, under 10% result in a criminal conviction.²¹ It is generally accepted that false accusations make up a small percentage of the total. This would mean that the overwhelming majority of rapists are never punished for their crimes. The figures suggest that it is particularly difficult to persuade the Crown Prosecution Service to prosecute in situations where the perpetrator is known to the victim.²² Within the British home, an estimated two women die every week as a result of domestic violence.²³

Images of women of an increasingly sexualised nature are used routinely in advertising campaigns to sell everything from cars to fruit juice, perpetuating the notion that women are mere sex objects who exist to fulfil male desires. Powerful elements within the media continue to portray prostitution as exotic, enjoyable and empowering through what Madeleine Bunting described in *The Guardian* as 'f ** lit'²⁴ but programmes such as Billie Piper's notorious *Secret Diaries of a Call Girl* are only the tip of the iceberg. In its 2004 programme *Can Condoms Kill?* attacking Cardinal Trujillo's position on AIDS and condoms, BBC Panorama filmed a legal brothel in the United States in which the prostitutes were referred to as 'professionals' and 'sex workers' being carefully looked after by a madam in a business suit. The implication was that these women had made a career choice like any other, enjoyed being prostitutes and were very much in control of the situation.

These programmes represent an insidious attempt to cover the harsh reality of an industry in which over 90% of prostitutes want to get out, a slightly higher proportion are drug-dependent and the

¹⁸ John Bonner, Eamon O'Dwyer, David Jenkins, Kieran O'Driscoll, Julia Vaughan, 'Statement by Obstetricians', 1 April 1992.

¹⁹ www.matercare-org/

²⁰ UNFPA State of the World Population Report 2000.

²¹ *The Truth about Rape* www.cer.truthaboutrape.co.uk/3-htm.

²² Ibid.

²³ Cf Women's Aid www.womensaid.org.uk.

²⁴ Madeline Bunting *Sorry, Billie, but prostitution is not about champagne and silk negligees* *The Guardian*, 8 October 2007.

majority have been the victims of violent assault and rape.²⁵ And these figures do not include the 120,000 women who are sold across Europe by sex traffickers every year.²⁶

When people are tempted to snigger at 'oppressed' women, it is worth remembering that women still get a raw deal, but that an ideology which claims to speak for women may be alienating and paralysing thousands of women who desire to fight against these injustices but are not prepared to bow down and worship the goddess of choice at the expense of innocent life.

EARLY FEMINISM REVISITED

What then is the answer, if radical feminism is incompatible with the Church's vision but injustices towards women continue, often with the tacit encouragement of the very people who claim to campaign in the name of women? I would propose that we need to do two things: firstly, to look at the status of women historically, particularly in the early twentieth century when the seeds of radical feminism were being sown by the likes of Marie Stopes whilst writers such as G.K. Chesterton championed the cause of marriage and family life; and secondly, go back to the vision of the first feminists and the climate that spawned the feminist movement in the first place.

Feminism did not appear out of nowhere and in an age where feminism has become associated with some of the most destructive aspects of contemporary society, particularly the breakdown of the family, it is necessary to be reminded of precisely what life was like for women at the time of Mary Wollstonecraft and later figures such as Virginia Woolf. The overwhelming majority of readers, I suspect, would agree that the status of women even as late as the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was unacceptable. Women were denied what are now regarded as basic human rights such as the vote, unrestricted access to higher education, financial autonomy and employment. It is a scandal that women did not achieve what is effectively full emancipation until the mid-twentieth century and that women have for so many centuries been denied the freedoms and opportunities that their male counterparts have been granted.

Chesterton's famous witticism is much-quoted even today: "Twenty million young women rose to their feet with the cry: 'We will not be dictated to!' and promptly became stenographers." I am prepared to concede that the remark made me laugh when I first heard it but it is also very instructive of the extent to which Chesterton and his contemporaries failed to 'grasp the nettle' when it came to the status of women. His defence of marriage, motherhood and procreation, made with characteristic passion and humour, were all too necessary at a time when it was already becoming fashionable to speak of marriage and family life in terms of servitude, imprisonment and even prostitution. However, his mockery of women who took advantage of their hard won right to education and training may well have undermined his efforts to defend the sanctity of marriage and the primacy of family life in the face of increasingly venomous opposition.

Chesterton quite rightly ridiculed the attitudes of those who sought to attack marriage and by extension the right to life and much of his vast body of writing suggests a man who was very much on women's side. As a mother, I can hardly suppress a cheer at his delightful rubbishing of Schopenhauer's insulting claim that women are the best people to raise children because they are like children themselves, "puerile, futile, limited." Chesterton answers: "If the 'futility' and 'limitation' of a little boy of seven lead him naturally to martyr himself for another little boy of

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Prime Minister's Question Time, quoted in The Medaille Trust newsletter 2007

seven, then the comparison is sound. But as we all know that they lead him to kick his shins and run away with his toys, the comparison is nonsense."²⁷

However, he ignored the consequences for women - and the institution of marriage - if society relegated women to the level of second class citizens. Without the right to education (even if it involved training to be dictated to), the ability to seek employment was extremely restricted; without the ability to earn a living, independence was impossible and a marriage of convenience offered the only realistic possibility of financial security. Hence the chilling, but not entirely slanderous assertion that marriage was a form of prostitution or servitude.

Financial coercion hardly offers the most promising start to married life but there is little suggestion in Chesterton's writings that he acknowledged that marriage for some women even in his own lifetime may have been an unhappy necessity. Instead, he is insistent that poor married couples at least are 'a business partnership'²⁸, the man contributing in his place of work, the woman within the household but if it was such a thing at any level, it was a partnership where one party alone owned the chequebook. He is open enough about the reality of marriages becoming unhappy but his tendency to trivialise the misery suffered by some women in abusive relationships weakens his other arguments. This is in no way to condemn Chesterton's apologetics, much of which remains as engaging and painfully insightful as it would have been during the Interwar period. However, his apparent failure to acknowledge the genuine struggles faced by women should serve as a warning to contemporary defenders of the Catholic Faith not to fall into the trap of ridiculing or dismissing arguments that require nuanced answers.

THE VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

Mary Wollstonecraft's contribution to feminist philosophy is a matter of some debate. She has been described as the founder of modern feminist philosophy, but a body of opinion questions whether she may be described as a feminist at all, largely, I suspect, because contemporary feminism has travelled so far from the convictions held by Wollstonecraft. Her ground-breaking work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, advocates a position few readers of this periodical would regard as controversial, seeking to strengthen not destroy the family unit. She condemns the tyrannical and insulting attitude of her age that weakness, vanity and stupidity were somehow 'natural' to womankind when society itself was cynically and despotically encouraging girls to develop into 'the toy of man, his rattle'²⁹, possessed of 'spaniel-like affection'³⁰ and 'tainted by coquetish arts'.³¹

Vindication supports and seeks to strengthen marriage, on the grounds that a strong and reasonable woman makes a better wife and mother, particularly as a mother is the primary educator of the next generation. As she puts it: "The woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will, by managing her family and practising various virtues, become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband."³² She also draws attention to the vulnerability and humiliation faced by women such as young widows, when they were deprived of their male protector and society had robbed them of any possibility of independence. Wollstonecraft was by no means the only person to criticise the oppression of women. She quotes a certain Dr Day, who in one of his books about the progressive education he had given his daughter, stated:

²⁷ Chesterton, *Men and Women; Husbands and Wives*; quoted from Brave New Family ed. Alvaro de Silva (Ignatius, 1990) pp.118-119

²⁸ Chesterton, *The Wildness of Domesticity*, quoted from Brave New Family ed. Alvaro de Silva (Ignatius, 1990) p. 77

²⁹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Dover Thrift, 1996 edition) p.33

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid. p.30.

³² Ibid. p.28.

"If women are in general feeble in body and mind, it arises less from nature than from education. We encourage a vicious indolence and inactivity, which we falsely call delicacy, instead of hardening their minds by the severer principles of reason and philosophy, we breed them to useless arts, which terminate in vanity and sensuality. In most of the countries which I had visited, they are taught nothing of an higher nature than a few modulations of the voice, or useless postures of the body; their time is consumed in sloth or trifles, and trifles become the only pursuits capable of interesting them. *We seem to forget, that it is upon the qualities of the female sex that our own domestic comforts and the education of our children must depend. And what are the comforts or the education which a race of beings, corrupted from their infancy, and unacquainted with all the duties of life, are fitted to bestow?* To touch a musical instrument with useless skill, to dissipate their husband's patrimony in riotous and unnecessary expenses, these are the only arts cultivated by women in most of the polished nations I had seen. And the consequences are uniformly such as may be expected to proceed from such polluted sources, private misery and public servitude." [my emphases].³³

Unlike the inward-looking, self-obsessed vision of womanhood presented by radical feminism, Wollstonecraft and her sympathisers promoted the rights of women because they believed the strength and health of society to be intimately bound up with the strength and dignity of women. Therefore, the ability of a woman to cultivate her own mind was not simply a matter of justice for women, a matter of her right to education on a par with men, it was recognised as having serious implications for the moral well-being of society. It is therefore perhaps by returning to the early (and indeed, very humble) demands of the woman's movement that the foundations of a new woman's movement might be laid.

And there is a need for this. It is all too easy in response to radical feminism to confront hate with hate, to demonise women on account of a movement that may not represent them, to trivialise the struggles women still face or to retreat into outdated attitudes. This will not do. I personally am unimpressed by people who attempt to silence me in the name of my 'right to choose' but I am equally unimpressed by the casual misogyny of a minority of Catholic laymen, who seem to find a female academic an amusing curiosity or who feel the need to suggest that my own 'time for intellectual enquiry really ought to be over' now that I am a wife and mother.

It is necessary to develop a new Catholic woman's movement which embraces and celebrates the Church's teachings, in particular the dignity of women, the sanctity of life, the primacy of the family and the need for men and women to work together with complementary gifts yet as equals in pursuit of the common good. Anything that hurts and oppresses women, whether it is a law, a prejudice or a misguided ideology, hurts humankind in its entirety. As John Paul II wrote in *Familiaris Consortio*:

"What human reason intuitively perceives and acknowledges is fully revealed by the word of God: the history of salvation, in fact, is a continuous and luminous testimony to the dignity of women. In creating the human race 'male and female' God gives man and woman an equal personal dignity, endowing them with the inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to the human person."

(www.faith.org.uk)

³³ Ibid. p.40.