



# Why Women Doing Theology Matters for Everyone: Sexual Violence, Tainted Legacies, and the Integrity of Anabaptist Theology

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## Abstract

With the now public knowledge of the sexual abuse carried out by the twentieth century's leading pacifist Mennonite theologian, the tainted legacies we are left with raise questions not only about the content of theology but also about the way theology is done. This article explores why women doing theology matters for everyone as part of the process of theology-making. It considers how the notion of taint is refracted through gender power relations to apply differently to women than to men and how this hinders the reception of women's theological contributions. It argues that women doing theology matters because of the way this illuminates the partiality of everyone's theology and, further, is necessary for the integrity of Anabaptist theology in the wake of sexual violence.

## Keywords

Tainted legacies; sexual violence; theology that is feminist; Anabaptism; John Howard Yoder

## Introduction

As my title indicates, this article is about theology, about women doing theology, and why that matters for everyone.<sup>1</sup> In this instance, my focus is not with advocating for church and academy to converse more with the theology that women produce — although that is certainly something I would be glad to see happening, especially that theology which emerges from feminist or womanist commitments. Rather, my contention here is that we have yet to comprehend what the implications of such theology are for *all* theological endeavour and, specifically, for the integrity of Anabaptist theology. This latter is a

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<sup>1</sup> The first version of this article was presented as the Annual Lecture of the Centre for Anabaptist Studies, Bristol Baptist College, UK, on 22 November 2023.

pressing question given the impact of sexual violence on Anabaptist theological legacies, which are now understood as tainted.

## Understanding Tainted Legacies

We are becoming more familiar with the idea of tainted legacies. An example from my own UK context comes from Bristol. There, the impact of a tainted legacy was keenly felt regarding the memorialisation in a statue of the town's benefactor who earned his fortune in part by his involvement in a company that had a monopoly on the West African Slave trade in the seventeenth century. In 2020, in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests and against a backdrop of dissatisfaction with city council inaction, citizens in Bristol took matters into their own hands and removed the statue of Edward Colston, toppling it from its plinth and pushing it into Bristol Harbour.<sup>2</sup>

Underpinning that incident is a debate, often contentious and understandably emotive, about how we respond to the growing public acceptance that sometimes what we have inherited and was previously lauded as good, and indeed did good, is enmeshed in, and indeed inseparable from, that which is not good; in this instance, some of Bristol's prosperity and wellbeing which was resourced from the buying, selling, and exploitation of Black human beings by white human beings. To describe this as a tainted legacy acknowledges that there are things that we inherit that have ethically compromised origins which cannot simply be assigned as belonging to the past and without contemporary consequence. Such acknowledgement, however, is only a starting point. We then have the question of how to respond to this knowledge: what is required of us now? What do we do with remainders, what are the possibilities of repair to harms done, and how do we decide?

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<sup>2</sup> Haroon Siddique and Clea Skopeliti, 'BLM Protesters Topple Statue of Bristol Slave Trader Edward Colston', *The Guardian*, 7 June 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/07/blm-protesters-topple-statue-of-bristol-slave-trader-edward-colston>> [accessed 28 February 2023]; Martin Farrer 'Who Was Edward Colston and Why Was His Bristol Statue Toppled?', *The Guardian*, 8 June 2020, <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jun/08/>> [accessed 28 February 2023].

In answer to these questions, Karen Guth theorises that ‘tainted legacies’ describe a ‘distinct moral problem’,<sup>3</sup> which in her context of the United States of America is common to the confederate monuments debate, the matter of slavery reparations in educational institutions, and sexual violence perpetrated by various artists and one theologian in particular, namely John Howard Yoder. Her concern is that this moral problem points to the need not only to redress past and present injuries of tainted legacies, but also to ‘consider the deeper structural injustices that enabled them, enacting a justice that wards against those harms in the future’.<sup>4</sup> Specifically with regard to sexual violence, she states our attention should be on the ‘cultural, structural, and institutional reforms needed to promote women’s flourishing’.<sup>5</sup> This is because abusive legacies (of whatever kind) exist within conceptual and material frameworks — our ways of thinking and doing — and it is these that need to be interrogated for the extent to, and ways in which, they have enabled the abuse in the first place.

My focus in this article is with responding to the tainted legacy of sexual violence on Anabaptist theology. It is necessary here to name that we now know that Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder (hereafter JHY<sup>6</sup> except in citations), who was once considered ‘the preeminent pacifist theologian of twentieth-century Christian ethics’,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies: Human Flourishing after Traumatic Pasts* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies*, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies*, p. 91.

<sup>6</sup> How we refer to JHY is not an inconsequential matter. The masculinist trend to use surnames seems inappropriate given that Yoder is not an uncommon name among Mennonites. (This convention also tends to obscure women’s visibility in published work given the presumption of male authorship in the male-dominated field of theology, which is why my usual naming convention is to provide full names on each mention.) Elizabeth Soto Albrecht uses John Howard Yoder’s initials rather than his full name as ‘an act of resistance and liberation’, in Elizabeth Soto Albrecht, ‘Preface’, in *Liberating the Politics of Jesus*, ed. by Elizabeth Soto Albrecht and Darryl W. Stephens (T&T Clark, 2020), pp. xiii–xvi (p. xiv). Indeed, the repeated use of JYH’s name in and of itself can be an offence as once again attention gets focused on him rather than on the need to attend to the harm he caused and the conditions that enabled it. Naming is unavoidable; initials are used here in order to be specific while attempting to mitigate against the repetition of a name that, for many — not least those who have been harmed (directly or indirectly) — causes distress.

<sup>7</sup> Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies*, p. 7.

was a sexual predator who, over three decades of his adult life, abused his authority and theology to violent ends against women. This naming is not done to vilify or dehumanise him, but rather serves two purposes. First, it ensures that this man's status as a revered theologian does not result in his behaviour being treated in a different light to that of other sexual predators who lack such community standing; in other words, he was not simply a theologian whose behaviour failed to live up to his theological ethics. And secondly, naming what happened as sexual violence brings with it the understanding that such abuse is fundamentally about power. As Ruth Krall explains, 'Sexual abuse is the methodology by which sexually or gender abusive perpetrators seek to manipulate, control and dominate the lives of their chosen victims.'<sup>8</sup> This analysis is crucial not only in dealing with the remainders of this tainted legacy — which include JHY's theology — but in addressing the deeper conceptual and structural injustice on which such abuse relies. Rachel Waltner Goossen's historical study of the last twenty-five years of JHY's life, which investigated the scope of his abuse and Mennonite institutional responses to it, is a story of women's lack of power within gender relations wherein their voices were muted, their experiences left unaddressed, and their safety and wellbeing ignored or made secondary to the interests of a prevailing male theological and religious status quo.<sup>9</sup> JHY himself used theology along with his institutional positions, intellectual authority, and academic reputation not only to carry out his abuse but to avoid accountability. Women he harmed struggled to get institutional support or have an informed analysis of the male-dominated framework, where 'male prerogative was simply taken for granted',<sup>10</sup> brought to bear on what was happening. The power that JHY was able to exert in his abuse was exacerbated by the unequal gender power relations for women in church and academy, where 'silence,

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Krall, *The Elephants in God's Living Room, Volume Three: The Mennonite Church and John Howard Yoder, Collected Essays* (Enduring Space Publications, 2013), p. 9, <<https://ruthkrall.com/books/the-elephants-in-gods-living-room-series/volume-three-the-mennonite-church-and-john-howard-yoder-collected-essays/>> [accessed 23 May 2022].

<sup>9</sup> Rachel Waltner Goossen, "Defanging the Beast": Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder's Sexual Abuse', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 89 (2015), pp. 7–60.

<sup>10</sup> Goossen, "Defanging the Beast", p. 43.

patriarchal assumptions, and concern for damage control<sup>11</sup> perpetuated and prolonged the harm. These are part of the deeper structural injustices referred to by Karen Guth that are bound up in tainted legacies and which need to be addressed and why, I am arguing, women doing theology matters for everyone.

What does it mean to view JHY's theological legacy as tainted? This has been an evolving story partly because although far more was known than openly acknowledged during JHY's lifetime and subsequently, it was only in the mid-2010s that information about his abuse was readily available and circulated.<sup>12</sup> Initially, the most prominent voices were those that sought either to rehabilitate JHY or to separate his work from his predatory actions, thereby leaving his theology unaffected.<sup>13</sup> The wider cultural zeitgeist in respect of gender-based violence expressed, for example, in the #MeToo movement, makes the rehabilitation of JHY — and other theologians who are sexual violence perpetrators — less palatable and plausible, though that does not necessarily extend to his theology. Voices that call for a thorough examination of JHY's theology in the light of his abuse to see, in the words of Ruth Krall, 'if, where and how his theology has been stunted, twisted, misshapen, or otherwise damaged by his long-term management of his personal life'<sup>14</sup> are beginning to be heard, although these are relatively few.<sup>15</sup> The legacy question, however, is unavoidable, even if not addressed directly — for example, those who simply now exclude JHY's work without comment are contributing to what a legacy looks like, arguably (whether intentionally or not) facilitating the silence around sexual violence and the structures in which it thrives. My view is that how we deal with this particular tainted legacy is a matter of the integrity of Anabaptist theology.

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<sup>11</sup> Goossen, "Defanging the Beast", p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> This was particularly through the work of Goossen, "Defanging the Beast".

<sup>13</sup> See Fran Porter, 'Facing Harm: What to Do with the Theology of John Howard Yoder?', *Anabaptism Today*, 4.1 (2022), pp. 4–5, available online <<https://www.academia.edu/87928115>> [accessed 15 November 2025].

<sup>14</sup> Krall, *Elephants*, p. 187.

<sup>15</sup> A good example is Isaac Samuel Villegas, 'The Ecclesial Ethics of John Howard Yoder's Abuse', *Modern Theology*, 37.1 (2021), pp. 191–214, doi.org/10.1111/moth.12623.

## The Gendering of Taint

Regardless of the particular stance taken, I have been struck by the juxtaposition of the notion of taint as it manifests with reference to JHY's theological legacy and how it is frequently applied to women in contexts of sexual violence. It seems to me that 'taint' is refracted through gender power relations to apply differently to women than to men. So often in cases of sexual violence against women, men have been listened to, while women have not been heard; men have been believed, while women have been doubted; men have been excused, while women have been blamed; men's reputations have been protected, while women's characters have been maligned. And when it comes to theology: men's legacies are now viewed as tainted whereas, throughout the centuries, women themselves have been viewed as the taint; even now as men's words are being preserved, redeemed, or lauded still, women's speech — not least in their telling of their own stories of experiences of sexual violence — is yet normatively to be held with equal esteem, garner similar respect, or be viewed as reliable or authoritative for everyone. As Leigh Gilmore has said,

Tainting women's testimony is a familiar element in ancient and modern cultures. In the law, both unreliable witnesses and degraded evidence are said to be tainted. The term carries both the physical properties of stain and impurity as well as the metaphorical suggestion of ruination. Women's testimony is frequently associated with unreliability because it is women's testimony. Doubting women is enshrined in the law, represented in literature, repeated in culture, embedded in institutions, and associated with benefits like rationality and objectivity. Quite simply, women encounter doubt as a condition of bearing witness. On the whole, women's testimony is greeted individually and in aggregate as messy, conflictual, and compromised.<sup>16</sup>

JHY's abuse is known to date back to the mid-1970s when it first came to the attention of Mennonite authorities. Much later, in 1992, a group of eight women, among whom were ministers, missionaries, and faculty members of Mennonite institutions, met the members of the recently formed JHY Task Force, which was one of the seven Mennonite institutional attempts between 1980 and 1997 to deal with

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<sup>16</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (Columbia University Press, 2017), pp 19–20.

JHY's actions.<sup>17</sup> These eight women gave first-hand accounts of their experiences of unwanted sexual approaches by JHY, with detailed and credible accounts of his sexual abuse extending back nearly two decades. After their stories had been shared, one of the women addressed each Task Force member in turn, calling each one by name and asking them, 'do you believe us?'.<sup>18</sup> As Ruth Krall comments,

Assured by each church official in attendance that the women were indeed believed and their stories trusted, this meeting was a denominational watershed in the church's management of Yoder. For the first time a small subgroup of Yoder's victims and their allegations were denominationally validated as being factually truthful. For the first time victim stories were individually and collectively acknowledged and promises of meaningful action were made.<sup>19</sup>

The habit of not taking women seriously, of not giving credence to what they say, or their ability to know for themselves, has a long history.<sup>20</sup> In view of this, even the title of a recent novel by Miriam Toews, which was made into a film in 2022, is subversive. Her book is called *Women Talking*.<sup>21</sup> (It must be said that the book is based on a highly disturbing premise, about which anyone who engages with it should be aware.) *Women Talking* focuses on a group of Mennonite women who have been given an ultimatum by the bishop of their colony. The book focuses on two days of conversations the women have during which they wrestle with how they should respond to what has been put before them. Eight men from the colony are currently in civil authority jail on charges relating to sexual violence against the women. Over recent years, nearly all the women and girls of the colony had been drugged and raped by these eight men, who had finally been handed over to civil authorities

<sup>17</sup> Listed in Goossen, "Defanging the Beast", p. 14. As Elizabeth Phillips summarises, 'Yoder's "submission" to the disciplinary process was grudging, resistant, obfuscating, and defensive.' Elizabeth Phillips, 'Anabaptist Political Theologies' in *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. by William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Scott Wiley (Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), pp. 332–345 (p. 342).

<sup>18</sup> See Goossen, "Defanging the Beast", pp. 56–57, and Carolyn Holderread Heggen, 'Misconceptions and Victim Blaming', *The Mennonite*, August 2014, <<https://archive.org/details/mennonite201417unse/page/n441/mode/1up>> [accessed 3 November 2025].

<sup>19</sup> Krall, *Elephants*, p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> So, while I find Karen Guth's framework of tainted legacies as a moral problem enormously helpful, I also want to remain mindful of the gendered dimensions involved when it comes to the deeper structural injustices involved in sexual violence against women.

<sup>21</sup> Miriam Toews, *Women Talking* (Faber & Faber, 2018).



after attacks on the perpetrators from within the colony. During these two days of conversation, most of the remaining men are absent, having gone to secure bail for those charged, to bring them back to the community while awaiting trial. When they return the women will be given the opportunity to forgive the men who attacked them in order to ensure that the men and the women themselves will be sure of their places in heaven. Should the women not forgive the men, the women are to be cast out of the colony, and thereby forfeit their entry through the gates of heaven.

In case this sounds like a salacious and misogynistic film industry-conceived concept, the book *Women Talking* was written, according to Miriam Toews, as ‘a reaction through fiction’ to actual events that occurred in a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia between 2005 and 2009. Many girls and women in the Manitoba Colony would wake up in the morning in pain and feeling drowsy, with bruised and bleeding bodies, having been attacked in the night. At first put down to a mixture of demonic activity, punishment from either God or Satan for their sins, or lying for attention-seeking or to cover up adultery, eventually the truth emerged — that eight men from the colony were responsible, using animal anaesthetic to render their victims unconscious before raping them.<sup>22</sup> In contrast to the girls’ and women’s accounts of what had happened to them initially being attributed (by the elders and some other men of the colony) to ‘wild female imagination’, Miriam Toews who herself grew up in a small Mennonite town in Canada, describes her book as an ‘act of female imagination’<sup>23</sup> in response.

In the book, as part of the imagined conversation in deciding how they should respond to the ultimatum they have been given — to forgive their rapists or be denied heaven — the women, who are illiterate, discuss the Bible and what it may say about what they should do.

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<sup>22</sup> Toews, ‘A Note on the Novel’, *Women Talking*, Kindle edition, location 15. See also Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, ‘The Ghost Rapes of Bolivia’, *Vice*, 20.8 (2013) <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/4w7gqj/the-ghost-rapes-of-bolivia-000300-v20n8>> [accessed 23 February 2023].

<sup>23</sup> Toews, ‘A Note on the Novel’, location 15.

We can't read, says Salome, so how are we to know what is in the Bible?

You are being difficult, says Mejal. We have been told what is in the Bible.

Yes, says Salome, by Peters [who is the bishop] and the elders and by our husbands.

Right, says Mejal. And by our sons.

Our sons! says Salome. And what is the common denominator linking Peters and the elders and our sons and husbands? [...] They are all men! [...]

Of course, says Mejal, I know that much. But who else would interpret the Bible for us?<sup>24</sup>

Later in the conversation, Salome encapsulates the difficulty the women have in determining how the Bible speaks into their situation: "The issue [...] is the male interpretation of the Bible and how that is "handed down" to us."<sup>25</sup>

This male interpretation of all things about God and how such is handed down are at the heart of why women doing theology matters, and not only when dealing with sexual violence against women. For whenever women do theology themselves, they break the dominant trend of centuries of men telling women who God is and what God expects of them — or rather more accurately, the dominant trend of centuries of a patriarchal agenda that keeps women subordinate to men. Specifically with respect to sexual violence, the disbelieving of women's stories of abuse, the tendency to victim-blame women as sexually provocative creatures, and the strategies women have to put in place to negotiate their own safety in going about their daily lives<sup>26</sup> are all part of a patriarchalism, with a long history of theological justification, that denies women's moral agency, sexualises women's personhood, and assumes public space as male territory to which women must adapt. However, the significance of women doing theology is not only for the content of their theological contribution, which may or may not be focused on gender concerns. Rather, I suggest that the very act of their theologising witnesses to women as moral agents, as persons created in the image of God, with the capacity to reflect on divine-human

<sup>24</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, Kindle edition, pp. 156–157.

<sup>25</sup> Toews, *Women Talking*, Kindle edition, p. 158.

<sup>26</sup> See Laura Bates, *Everyday Sexism* (Simon & Schuster, 2014).

encounters and interpret divine disclosure. In saying all this, it seems I am making an argument for why women doing theology matters for women, but thinking of the particularity of theology that is feminist is where I start in making the case for why women doing theology matters for everyone.

## Revisiting Women's Experience and Difference

So, why does women doing theology matter for everyone? I start with the recognition that each one of us imagines and understands God — that is, theologises — from within a context. As material beings, we are all located in cultural space somewhere, unable to separate from the myriad influences that have formed us and now make up our lives. This is true also for our faith: there is no neutral space from which we learn of God, and we do not follow Jesus in a cultural vacuum. Our different locations mean we bring different awareness, concerns, and questions to our theologising. When it comes to women, our different location<sup>27</sup> within gender power relations brings that experience to our questions about God, the world, and ourselves. In saying this, I have introduced two of the most demanding and contentious notions within feminist discourse, and which are often sites of confusion in Christian theologising, namely, 'difference' and 'women's experience', so I will clarify how I am using these terms.

In talking of 'women's experience', I am using the phrase in a particular way. Akin to other theologies of liberation, 'experience' refers to the lived experience of oppression — of injustice, inequality, discrimination, and/or disadvantage — embedded in our social, political and, for feminists, personal<sup>28</sup> relations and frameworks. 'Women's experience', therefore, is an analytical category that focuses on women's structurally subordinate position within society and, for the purposes of

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<sup>27</sup> Arguably 'locations' in the plural when taking intersectionality into account.

<sup>28</sup> The phrase 'the personal is political' refers to the understanding that, contrary to dominant opinion, women's lived experience is not irrelevant to wider discussions about how society functions, what is valued, and the practices of public institutions (be they economic, political, or academic); that male dominance in both public and private domains is mutually reinforcing of women's subordination.

this article, within theology.<sup>29</sup> By structurally subordinate I am talking about the inequalities within gender power relations that tend to disadvantage women, and which have shaped not only social relations and philosophical frameworks, but religious communities and theological enquiry. This gender hierarchy is about how we think, behave, and organise. It has kept women out of religious leadership and theological endeavour and relegated femaleness within theology itself. And it has done so on theological grounds, which have been used to support two mutually endorsing notions: one is of maleness as normative humanity — which is the idea that the male and maleness most fully represent human existence and experience; the other is a gender dualism that not only conceives of gender in binary terms (men are this, women are that), but comes with a value system that prizes so called male or masculine attributes more than it does those associated with women. These mutually reinforcing notions have long been resistant to theological ideas that challenge male dominance in gender relations and they have also exhibited a disinterest in, or denial of, matters that are part of women's lives being sites of theological reflection. It is part of the particularity of theology that is feminist to persist in both these endeavours, and this involves consideration of difference, including pointing out the difference that women's theologising brings.

Talk of difference is fraught with difficulty because it has a long history of being weaponised against women. When you combine a presumption of male normativity with gender dualism, gender difference is not about how women and men may differ from each other, but how women differ from men. 'Difference' is something belonging to femaleness; women are the 'other'. Women's supposed difference from the norm has been used as a reason to exclude, marginalise, discriminate against, render inferior, or consider

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<sup>29</sup> As an analytical category, it is not simply a collection of individual experiences — not simply my story and your story — but rather a way of understanding such lived realities that identify the harm done to women by patriarchal structures and mindsets. As Dorothee Soelle has said, 'Feminist theology arises, as does every liberation theology, from the experience of being wounded.' Dorothee Soelle, *Theology for Sceptics* (Mowbray, 1993), p. 39. Such wounds are often made visible through the telling of a particular story, and as such illuminate the impact of structural subordination.

inadequate. Any consideration of difference, therefore, needs to be mindful of its history and continued use as a tool deployed against women's full and equal human personhood. At the same time, when not so weaponised, women's different experience within gender power relations can bring a distinctive contribution to both theology and practice. Without advocating essentialism, women may 'see or do things differently' because of the particularity of female embodiment and because of socially constructed gender experience, the latter always mediating the former. This contribution to theologising has been valued by many women, and not only by women, but what is not so often appreciated within theology more broadly is how theology that is feminist highlights the partiality of much mainstream theology. I suggest we see this dynamic clearly in criticisms that are made of theological ideas that emerge from women's lives, criticisms which I have come to think of as a theological equivalent to magicians' misdirection.

### **Theological Misdirection**

Magicians use what is often termed misdirection to absorb an audience's attention in one place, so that actions making the illusion work somewhere else go unnoticed. Indeed, the art of the illusionist is that as an audience we think where we are watching is all there is to see, and we miss the significance of what is happening away from our focus. The analogy to theology is limited, but my point is that criticisms of theology that is feminist detract attention from critiques such theology is making of established theology that does not emerge from feminist sensibilities.

So, for example, when we think of using female metaphors and pronouns for deity — for any number of reasons, from affirming women's divinely created human personhood in the image of God to expanding our understanding of the divine beyond the confines of one gender — and the objection is made that this is an attempt to turn God into a woman or make God female, this argument misses the point that female metaphors and pronouns for deity are declarations that God is not a man or male. This needs saying, for, in the words of Elizabeth Johnson,

While officially it is rightly and consistently said that God is spirit and so beyond identification with either male or female sex, yet the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction conveys a different message: God is male, or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male than as female.<sup>30</sup>

The ubiquitous theological practice of privileging male references for God and the accompanying opposition to the inclusion of female ones, even their occasional use (even though this latter only serves to underscore how much an aberration from the norm this is), imprints in personal and community understanding an association of God with maleness and, at the same time, a disassociation of God from femaleness. Why does this matter? Because as succinctly put by Mary Daly in 1973, 'If God is male, then the male is God.'<sup>31</sup> Exclusive or dominant male imagery for God perpetuates inequality between women and men and specifically male dominance over women.

In this context of the overwhelming dominance of male imagery and language for the divine in Christian communities, what theology that draws on female metaphors points to, but is often lost from our view, is the necessary reminder that male language for God, while legitimate, does not mean God is male and this has implications for social relations. Indeed, it may be that, because gender dualism is so prominent as an interpretive lens through which we come to our understanding of God, we miss much meaning embedded in male metaphorical language. I wonder, for example, what it would be like if, when we come together to say the prayer that Jesus taught the disciples and which starts with 'Our Father', we introduced it with the reminder that God as Father was a metaphor of belonging based not on social status or human family connections, or on privilege, power, and patronage, but on relationship to the Creator, freely offered to all with the invitation to become disciples and friends. Analogous to, yet as with all analogies differentiated from, the figure of the senior male person in first century households, this metaphor expressed a truth that confounded first century social mores of respectability and social order,

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad, 1997), pp. 4–5.

<sup>31</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Women's Press, 1986), p. 19.

and of male power. For, to belong to a new community in God, rather than identifying with family, religious, political, or national allegiances, was disturbing to the existing social and indeed sacral order. As I have argued elsewhere, the image of God as father was a direct challenge to the place of all patriarchs, whether in kin networks, households, or as heads of states. Its significance is not as a male as opposed to female metaphor, but as a picture that confounds systems of domination.<sup>32</sup> This is not to say that other interpretations of the metaphor are not available. But there needs to be room for this conversation in theology, not simply in theology that is feminist. The theology women do matters for everyone because it has implications for everyone's theology.

What the particularity of theology that is feminist does in bringing this contribution to theology is highlight the partiality of all theological endeavour. Theology rooted in women's embodied (both physical and social) experience exposes how dominant theological traditions have been generated, interpreted, and perpetuated by male theologians who inhabit the social location of their gender, where male is both norm and frequently inherently privileged in gender power relations. Such partiality limits theological imagination for everyone, particularly that which resonates with the lives of women, but it also works against attention being given to the harms the status quo does to women.

## Anabaptist Theology

Anabaptist theology comes under this critique. The androcentric nature of Anabaptist theology was highlighted by feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theological writers in the *MCC Women's Concerns Report* (published 1972–2004). As Carol Penner has pointed out, these writers portrayed Jesus as good news for women and other groups on the margins of power, a Jesus who was 'remarkably different from the Jesus presented by male Anabaptist writers, who often emphasized a servant Jesus who called others to suffer', thereby revealing 'Anabaptist

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<sup>32</sup> Fran Porter, *Women and Men After Christendom: The Dis-Ordering of Gender Relationships* (Paternoster, 2015), pp. 20–22.

theology’ as ‘male Anabaptist theology’.<sup>33</sup> For the call to give up privilege and power made sense from the stance of the advantages of male social location, in contrast to women who, from their lived experience of a relative lack of power, resonated with Jesus’s message of liberation.

Anabaptist theology has also been wanting in contexts of violence against women. Succinctly put in a comment made in the context of a 1991 Mennonite conference on peace theology and violence against women, ‘Since most peace theology has been articulated by men, women’s experience of violence has not been adequately addressed.’<sup>34</sup> As Stephanie Krehbiel comments, ‘Mennonite pacifist discourse evolved as a response to the dominant ideal of warrior masculinity, a way for men to justify not going to war: it has never been as fully formed or celebrated for its challenge to interpersonal violence.’<sup>35</sup>

To address violence against women, however, has far-reaching theological implications: for christologies of a suffering Christ, which are misapplied to abused women; for the focus on the primacy of restoration of offenders in reconciliation processes based on Matthew 18 and which ignore systemic power differences; and for the ecclesiological understanding of church as the new community, with its pressures to perform as an alternative to surrounding society, hindering the opportunity for Christian communities to discern the work of God happening outside of themselves. Referring to Mennonite and Brethren churches, Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite states,

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<sup>33</sup> The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a North American Anabaptist service organisation involved in relief, development, and peacebuilding. The *Report* was an initiative that focused on women’s concerns around peacebuilding. Always edited by women, 171 issues of the *Report* were produced, containing theological articles written from white (Feminist), Black (womanist), and Latin (*mujerista*) women’s social locations. See Carol Penner, ‘Jesus and the Stories of Our Lives’, in *Liberating the Politics of Jesus*, ed. by Albrecht and Stephens, pp. 33–52, (pp. 46, 47).

<sup>34</sup> ‘Listeners Report from the Consultation’ in *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, ed. by Elizabeth G. Yoder, Vol. 16, Occasional Papers (Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), pp. 119–121, (p. 119).

<sup>35</sup> Stephanie Krehbiel, ‘The Woody Allen Problem: How do We Read Pacifist Theologian (and Sexual Abuser) John Howard Yoder?’, *Religion Dispatches*, 11 February 2014, <<https://religiondispatches.org/the-woody-allen-problem-how-do-we-read-pacifist-theologian-and-sexual-abuser-john-howard-yoder/>> [accessed 8 June 2022].



Secarian Pacifism needs to be confronted directly on their theology of obedience (and especially the submission of women), following the example of the sacrificial love of Christ (especially imposed on women to model Christ's suffering), as well as the pressures to be the self-righteous, "good" community against the evil world.<sup>36</sup>

She writes that the case of sexual misconduct charges against JHY 'is a prime example of how these theological perspectives can coconspire to facilitate violence against women and prevent an appropriate institutional response.'<sup>37</sup> Further, she argues,

It is crucial [...] to recognize that Yoder's sexual misconduct toward so many women is not something that should be treated as just a personal flaw and be separated from his pacifist views. Pacifism needs to examine its own deep inheritance in misogyny and to change not only by including women more in its authority structures but in its theological and biblical approaches as well.<sup>38</sup>

So, women doing theology matters for everyone because theology that is feminist is part of the human endeavour to grasp something of God and has implications for all theological work. Put simply, all theology is theology, and that is why I choose here to talk not of feminist theology but of theology that is feminist, by which I mean theology that rather than overlooking, marginalising, silencing or denigrating women, whether by intention or through obliviousness, instead affirms and witnesses to women's full human personhood as those made in the image of God. My argument is that, in part, the way such theology does this is by illuminating the partiality of much theology considered to be universal, but which obscures or denies its contextual origins. All theology is rooted in cultural contexts somewhere and what theology that is feminist can do is expose where the embodied male advantage inherent in unequal gender power relations has shaped much of the theological status quo.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that, in the abstract or as a matter of normative method, theology that is feminist should be the criteria by which other theological contributions are assessed (though

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<sup>36</sup> Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield: Christian Theology and the Global War on Women* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 48.

<sup>37</sup> Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield*, p. 157.

<sup>38</sup> Thistlethwaite, *Women's Bodies as Battlefield*, p. 157.

that would certainly be appropriate in specific instances, not least with what we are dealing with here). Nor am I suggesting that theology that is feminist should simply be accepted without scrutiny, any more than any other theology should be (although arguably, theology that is feminist often has not been treated just like any other theology but rather viewed either as suspicious or as frivolous, because of its female authorship). What I am saying is that theology that is feminist speaks to all theological endeavour not just as an added or more often optional perspective, but as a contribution that has its place as part of a core conversation, ensuring that women's realities and their theological contributions are involved in shaping the theology produced, correcting the default of androcentric bias.

I would make a similar argument about theology that emerges from other embodied human experiences that are denied in, or excluded from, established theological accounts. To argue this, of course, presents us with an impossible task. The scope of theological endeavour in our own corner of the world, let alone around the globe, is overwhelming. The very awareness that this is the case in itself can tell us much about our own situatedness and associated partiality, yet we cannot possibly engage with the abundance of theological imagination potentially available to us. I would contend, however, that, at certain times and places, because of situations we find ourselves in, theology from particular locations calls for our attention — if we can only hear it. And the tainted legacies of Anabaptist theology with which we are currently confronted because of sexual violence against women, justified on theological grounds, but undergirded by centuries of patriarchal cultures and structures, are just such a time and place where it is women doing theology in particular who must be heard. Karen Guth puts it this way:

While a wide range of Christian reflection will be helpful in engaging tainted legacies, feminist and womanist theologians are among the particularly well situated, having spent decades reckoning with Christianity itself as one of the most influential tainted legacies in human history. Feminist concern for the

ways sexism corrupts Christian texts, doctrines, and practice, along with womanist analysis of the ways sexism intersects with racism, classism, and other oppressions to harm black women and the whole community, is critical to our inquiry here.<sup>39</sup>

In citing this, I am not suggesting that it is only women who should be doing this theology, but rather that their theological voices must be included, and at times lead, in shaping *everyone's* theology in the context of sexual violence against women.

## Response

To conclude, theology implicated in violence is not new. That theology and theologians known for advocacy of non-violence and peace-making should perpetrate and/or fail to prevent sexual violence, not only in this prominent situation but also in many others whether conspicuous or not, is injurious not only to women harmed directly, but also to all those, whether individually or corporately, whose capacity to trust has been undermined and confidence in Christian faith wounded. This speaks to the integrity of Anabaptist theology. I talk of integrity not reputation to emphasise that it is not about the self-concern of preserving what we look like in the eyes of others, of protecting the standing of church and academy, all of which have deflected from responding to the harms done. Rather, integrity is about the substance of who we are, even when no-one is looking. There is both deficit and distortion in Anabaptist theology when it comes to the wellbeing of women. How those of us who engage with this theology now respond, indeed that we do respond, is a matter of integrity for Anabaptist theology.

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<sup>39</sup> Guth, *The Ethics of Tainted Legacies*, p. 22.