

**Friendship, Faith and Feminism - how Ursula King taught me all I really  
need to know about being a good theologian**

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**ABSTRACT**

Tina Beattie weaves together a personal account of her own intellectual development during her years of being a student and close friend of Ursula King, with a celebration of Ursula's scholarship, life and example, and with a searching exploration of their different approaches to questions of gender, spirituality and postmodernity. Tina positions Ursula as one of the last generation of great European Catholic intellectuals, but also as a pioneer in new approaches to the study of religions and in the fields of feminist theology and gender studies. She considers her wide-ranging interests in spirituality and feminist theology, comparative studies of religion, the life and works of Teilhard de Chardin, the study of Hinduism, and the relationship between science and religion. She describes how she first met Ursula when she was a mature student at the University of Bristol, and how her own intellectual development began to diverge from Ursula's early influence by way of the 'linguistic turn' and a shift to deconstructive and psychoanalytic approaches to language and knowledge. She compares Ursula's optimistic and progressive account of postmodernity with her own darker and more sceptical approach, observing that these differences represent fundamental issues across the terrain of postmodern scholarship. Situating herself as a postmodern theologian intrigued by the subterranean effects of desire on human knowing and acting, and Ursula as a thinker who exemplifies the progressive vision of liberal modernity in her optimistic account of the potential of postmodernity, she offers both a loving tribute to a cherished friend and mentor, and a searching critique of contemporary intellectual life and its discontents.

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## Homemaking

In 1991, I began a degree in Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Bristol. I had moved to Bristol with my husband and four young children three years earlier at the age of thirty three, having spent nearly all my life in central Africa (Zambia, Kenya and Zimbabwe). I had left school at fifteen with a clutch of 'O' levels. I was living in Lusaka at the time and in order to continue my education I would have had to go to boarding school. I did a secretarial course instead, following my mother's advice to learn to type before getting married and having children, because then I'd always be able to support my children if my husband left me. That was 1970 – the year Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* was published (Greer, 1970). I read it, and it stirred something in me. 'Tina, be a feminist if you must but be feminine first,' warned my mother when she saw what I was reading. I tried to follow that advice too.

I was a valiant homemaker and earth mother during the early years of mothering in Bulawayo and then Harare in the 1980s. After a few years of atheism in my late teens, inspired by Ayn Rand's novels, I had returned to the Presbyterian Church of my childhood when my children were little, to find myself in the midst of a community of white evangelicals. I tried desperately hard to keep up with the homemaking charismatics – stay-at-home mothers with servants and swimming pools (I had both). I tried speaking in tongues in the shower so that nobody would hear me, and I practised the virtues of wifely submission and home baking. I nearly drove my husband crazy. He had been a 1960s English university student. Being married to an increasingly frustrated and bad-tempered evangelical doing her best to submit was not what he had signed up to.

I was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1986 while living in Harare, shortly after the birth of my fourth child. I was initially attracted by the work of Catholic organisations and religious orders seeking to contribute to the development of that young country after the war-torn years following Ian Smith's 1965 Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). (It occurs to me now that Brexit feels a bit like UDI, with Nigel Farage playing the Ian Smith role). My fourth pregnancy had entailed a long stay in hospital culminating in an emergency caesarean. A retired Presbyterian minister visited me and brought me books to read, and they were all by Catholic authors, including Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Ruth Burrows and Thomas Merton. My attraction to Catholicism grew as I began to explore writings that went so much further and deeper than the platitudinous pieties of the evangelical authors I had been reading.

When my son was six weeks old, I went to see a Catholic priest. He began to speak about transubstantiation. I told him I had no problems with that – I was after all a biblical evangelical, and I believed the words of Jesus in John 6:53: 'Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.' No, my problem was the Pope and the Virgin Mary, I told him. He laughed. 'If you can say the creed and pray the Mass, you have the rest of eternity to sort out those little problems,' he said. I was received into the Catholic Church three months later. Then my husband

announced that he was homesick for England, so we packed up and I left behind the fantasy life of the suburban postcolonial homemaker forever.

A year later, I could be found kneeling before the dusty *pietà* in Saint Bonaventure's Catholic Church in Bristol, surrounded by the waft of incense and candle wax, begging her to give me the strength to cope with the unfamiliar world in which I found myself. English Catholicism felt utterly alien to me after my initiation into the inculturated Masses of the African Church. However, the Holy Mother of God had gone from being the cause of my lingering Presbyterian scepticism to being a cosmic force of nature and a maternal figure of immense compassion, intimacy and solidarity. For the first time in my life, I was in a faith tradition that offered me symbols and devotions I could relate to. In some visceral part of my being, I had discovered a hunger for something more tangible than the dour Father God of Presbyterian sermons and the gentle Jesus meek and mild of my childhood prayers. I was awakening to the sacramentality of the Catholic understanding of creation as saturated in grace and revealing of God.

Professor Denys Turner, then teaching in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Bristol University, attended Mass at Saint Bonaventure's with his wife Marie, and their children used to babysit for us. I asked him what my chances were of being accepted as a mature student at the University. I had by then managed to acquire one A level in English Literature, which I did when I was eight months pregnant with my third child. With Denys's encouragement, I applied and went for an interview. In preparation, I read a few theology books. I learned to say 'Edward Schillebeeckx' because I thought that would impress them – and of course, I spoke about my enthusiasm for Teilhard. I started university in September 1991 at the age of thirty six – the same month that my youngest child started school. Professor Ursula King was Head of Department.

### **Encountering Ursula King**

That is by way of preamble, but it is also to give some sense of what a life-changing experience it was for me – not just to go to university, but to encounter the *tour de force* that was Ursula King. From the start, I remember her being deeply engaged with my studies and caring about me as a person, attracted perhaps by my interest in Teilhard. It was not always easy-going. I was like a child in a sweetshop. I had been accepted to do a combined degree in Theology and Literature, then I decided I wanted to change to Theology and Philosophy, then I decided to change to single honours Theology and Religious Studies. Ursula became exasperated with me. I learned early on that crossing swords with her is not for the faint-hearted, but we battled it out and by the end of that first year the seeds of an enduring friendship had been sown and I had settled into my studies. Two years later, Ursula supervised my undergraduate dissertation. Those were the days when postgraduate funding was relatively easy to get, and one did not always need an MA to do a PhD. I went straight from my undergraduate degree to a PhD, funded by a British Academy grant and supervised by Ursula. My thesis had the modest and unassuming title of 'God's Mother, Eve's Advocate: A

Gynocentric Refiguration of Marian Symbolism in Engagement with Luce Irigaray' (see Beattie, 1999, 2002).

Throughout my postgraduate studies, Ursula did everything she could to create opportunities for me to advance my career. She knew better than I did what I was up against. I co-edited two books with her (King and Beattie, 2001, 2004). When she went on sabbatical, I took over as acting Director of the highly successful Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender which she had started, and which was given a five star rating in the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

In many ways, however, it was all still a game to me. I had never set out to become a career academic. I had just scratched an itch – the itch of having left school too young without a degree, and feeling that I had failed to develop any aspect of my life other than those associated with marriage and motherhood. I was also driven by a desire to understand more of the Catholic theological tradition. Despite that early exposure to *The Female Eunuch*, I was not a feminist. I simply took what opportunities presented themselves, and in those early days many were opportunities that Ursula had engineered.

Things became difficult at Bristol when various conflicts emerged in the department. Ursula took early retirement, and I resigned as a visiting lecturer. The Centre for Comparative Studies in Religion and Gender was closed. That was when I began to realize that, as a feminist and a German woman, Ursula was more of an outsider to the parochial and still largely androcentric world of English academic theology than I would ever be. I was also gradually becoming aware that the resistance of academic theologians to feminism and the then emergent field of gender studies went far beyond personality struggles and departmental tensions. Perhaps that was when I started to take feminism seriously.

In 2002, I was offered a full-time post in the Theology and Religious Studies Programme at the University of Roehampton in London, and new opportunities began to open up. I have never been an activist and campaigner, but my theology inadvertently became a form of activism. I discovered that, like the Eye of Sauron, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) had a predatory and all-seeing gaze that would pick out the most obscure feminist if she offended the sensibilities of doctrinal vigilantes. My theological support for same-sex marriage, women's ordination and the legalisation of early abortion led to repeated bannings and 'disinvitations'. I had come a very long way from Presbyterian homemaker to banned Catholic feminist theologian!

During all those years, Ursula has remained my beacon, my mentor, my defender and my friend. We have shared the struggles of combining mothering (and later grandmothering) with our academic careers. She describes commuting between London and Leeds to teach, with her baby in a carrycot beside her. She laughs as she describes rushing home from lecturing to prepare dinner for a well-known visiting male professor, with the realization

that he had a wife who did the cooking and he would never know what juggling most women academics do to combine all these roles.

Ursula is a lavish and generous hostess, eager for every opportunity to bring friends, family and colleagues together over a good meal. She has never forgotten my birthday, and my husband Dave and I have had many lovely evenings with Ursula and her husband Tony. I am writing this soon after Theresa May called a general election in 2017, confident of winning a landslide victory. Ursula and Tony came to watch the election results on television with us, and Ursula and I sat on the settee drinking wine and laughing and hugging one another as the results came in and it became clear that Labour under Jeremy Corbyn had performed better than anybody had predicted. Ursula is to the left of the political spectrum and a passionate defender of publicly funded social services, health care and education.

With PhD students of my own now, I try to live up to Ursula's example. There is something unique about the relationship between supervisor and student, and I learned from Ursula how much it means to give that relationship the attention it deserves. Many of her former students have gone on to excel in their careers and vocations. She still visits most of us and makes us feel connected by passing on news and stories from one to another. But it's not just students. She keeps in touch with the woman who used to look after her children when they were living in Delhi, and I have seen the loyalty and care she shows for friends in times of sickness and difficulty. During my mother's dying years, Ursula wrote to her several times and she always asked after her and invited us to tea when my mother came to visit.

When I reflect on Ursula's life and career, the word that comes to mind is 'holistic' – a word she uses more comfortably than I do. Her life straddles many worlds. She has studied and taught in Germany, France, India and the UK, and she is one of the most globe-trotting people I have ever known, with an insatiable curiosity about different cultures and traditions. She reads widely and avidly. Every time I visit her, she has set aside a stash of books and articles on a wide range of topics that she wants to tell me about. Unlike many of us, she has not mastered the techniques of social media and the internet enough to allow these to distract her from sustained habits of reading. She is one of the last generation of great Catholic European intellectuals – multilingual, wide-ranging in her interests, filled with that *joie de vivre* which characterises a scholar with a vast appetite for knowledge that overflows narrow disciplinary boundaries and rigid academic conventions. She writes movingly of being the only woman studying theology at university in Paris, where she did her STL: 'I was forever in a minority, often a minority of one. I was the permanent outsider among a large group of men studying theology and preparing for the priesthood' (King, 2015, 12). She is schooled in the Latin rigours of the Catholic theological tradition, she has studied under Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), and she has moved in circles that included many of the best-known Catholic thinkers of the twentieth century. She is one of the world's leading Teilhard scholars, and she has a deep and enduring love for the study of Hinduism.

Yet she is impatient with what she would see as the boring pedantry of what others regard as scholarly rigour. ('So boring' is one of her most frequent comments on academic papers we have endured together at conferences)! Even as she moves comfortably within that genteel and vanishing world of European Catholic culture, she has been a pioneer in the fields of comparative studies of religion, the study of spirituality, and of course feminist theology and religion and gender. She describes the exhilaration of hearing a famous woman professor lecturing at a seminar in Paris when she was young, and how liberating that experience was:

After years of listening to male professors, I suddenly encountered a woman with whom I could identify, who unknowingly affirmed me in my own powers and determination to be a female teacher passionately concerned with intellectual issues. It was like tearing down an invisible wall of silence, piercing through an incapacitating muteness, and calling me into speech with words only found years later, and through many experiences of nonrecognition, refusal, and exclusion. (King, 2015, 13)

Ursula's interest in feminist theology has led her to dedicate much of her career to the promotion of women's voices in the study of theology and religion, particularly women from the global South (King 1994). She has created networks of solidarity and support which have given many of us the strength to persevere despite the widespread hostility to feminism that persists in theology and religious studies. I have lost track of the number of women PhD students I have met who were advised not to do feminist research because they would find it difficult to get a job afterwards. I cannot help but wonder how much feminist theology has suffered from so many of the brightest and the best being pressurised into following other paths in their research. Were it not for Ursula I doubt that I would have had the confidence to face down the opposition, and I suspect I speak for many of her former students. She is also the reason why, in the bibliography to this article, I have spelled out the first names of authors in contravention of the house style. I learned that from Ursula too: initials disguise gender differences and mask the contribution that women scholars make to research.

Perhaps the breadth, energy and joy of Ursula's approach to life could be summarised in words that she herself uses to describe Teilhard. She speaks of 'the world-affirming quality of Teilhard's spirituality' and she describes his 'delight', his 'passion', and his 'wonder' (King, 2016, 220, citing Chardin, 1978, 80-83). These are all words that I would use to describe Ursula's life and spirituality.

### **Approaching Postmodernity**

Ursula's wide-ranging interests also make her something of a paradox, and this is where I am aware of the differences between us. Like many of her generation, Ursula is an optimistic Catholic shaped in the mould of Vatican II, with confidence in the self-improving, progressive capacities of human individuals, societies and institutions. Her liberalism is rooted in a deep

conservatism of the best kind. She looks askance at some of the frothy parodic performances of her postmodern colleagues and students (including me). She paints her bright colours of hope and vitality in broad brushstrokes on a large canvas, and she is impatient with those who focus on the gloom and darkness of violence, evil and suffering. Her feminism is a spirituality of global empowerment, inspiration and transformation, rather than a theology of critique and deconstruction.

My years of study with Ursula more or less coincided with the time during which the 'linguistic turn' and the emergence of gender studies were bringing about a paradigmatic shift in the methods and approaches of feminist scholarship. Still today, there are ongoing debates between those who defend the experiential, politicised approaches of liberal and liberationist feminist studies of the 1970s and 1980s, and those who advocate the more linguistic and deconstructive postmodern approaches that have become increasingly influential since the early 1990s (see Beattie, 2006; Chopp & Davaney, 1997; Neill et al, 1999). These divergent trends explain some of the differences that began to develop between my work and Ursula's.

During my undergraduate studies, I became more and more dissatisfied with what today I would refer to as the epistemologies I was encountering. (In those days, I was still more familiar with the language of epistemologies than epistemologies!) At the risk of over-simplification, I would identify three dominant perspectives in the modules I was studying. (The widespread shift in British universities to modularisation – surely not unrelated to the postmodern fragmentation of knowledge – coincided with my time at university).

Systematic theology and philosophy of religion seemed to involve learned men living in intellectual bubbles, arguing with one another about questions that increasingly made me want to ask, 'who knows and who cares?' I never doubted that I wanted to study theology because then and now, the God question is to me the only question that can hold together and render coherent our human quest for knowledge across the wondrous and mysterious landscape of the material cosmos. While my knowledge of modern academia was extremely limited, I understood enough to know that, if I wanted to ask questions about God, then theology was the only discipline that would allow me to do so. I had not, however, anticipated having to wade through so many dry speculative tomes, and my impatience with a certain intellectual style took root and grew into almost wholesale rejection. Only in my postgraduate years would I begin to appreciate patristic and medieval sources as offering alternative theological approaches, but I still find that coming at theology obliquely through psychoanalysis and gender studies but also through literature, film and art is more satisfying than engaging with it full on.

Despite my early frustrations, however, I remain a theologian rather than a scholar of religions or gender theorist, because my studies of Lacan have persuaded me that every linguistic culture (and therefore every human culture) is predicated upon its theology. We are indeed made in the image of God, and as our traditions imagine God so we imagine ourselves. Our psychic

structures are products of our religious cultures (see Beattie, 2013, 273-275). More importantly though, I value the creative tension of navigating between fidelity to a faith tradition with its doctrines, devotions and communities of practice, and the demands of academic scholarship with its more critical and searching perspectives. I also remain convinced that theology originates in prayer, though it must be developed by study, scrutinised by reason and illuminated by grace if it is to be meaningful.

In those undergraduate years, there were also modules in Buddhism and Hinduism taught by lecturers who discouraged comparative approaches. I found it difficult to relate to these belief systems with no comparative context or familiar points of reference, and no knowledge of their scriptural languages, historical cultures or practising communities. I am glad that I took those modules, but I still think there was an inevitable superficiality and the risk that a little knowledge can sometimes be more dangerous than no knowledge at all.

Methods and approaches in the study of religions seemed to come from the opposite end of the spectrum, in books written by 'outsiders' whose view from nowhere aroused deep suspicion in me from the beginning, not least because the only religious perspective they seemed to share was a deep antipathy to Christianity. I later read Timothy Fitzgerald's *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2000) and realized that I was not alone in my doubts.

I was gradually warming to feminism, but I was also frustrated by tendencies to over-generalisation and the universalisation of feminist claims that did not seem to me to represent the vast and often irreconcilable diversity of different women's cultures, experiences and beliefs. (Bear in mind that I had until recently been an evangelical homemaker, and those feminist perspectives and experiences did not describe the women I had been living amongst). Again, I began to discover other questioning voices, including Mary McClintock Fulkerson's *Changing the Subject* (1994).

Through these various critical questions and explorations, my intellectual development began to move towards the borderlines of the established curriculum. The title of my third year undergraduate dissertation marks the beginning of my own linguistic turn in the direction of psycholinguistics and feminist theory: 'Dominant Discourses and Silenced Rebellions: Women and Christianity in Africa'. The generic breadth of the subtitle betrays the growing quest for a more deconstructive approach suggested by the main title. I was moving into a space of liminality, between fading and emergent ways of knowing.

The Derridean, Marxist, Freudian and Lacanian approaches of scholars such as Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak spoke to my restless postcolonial spirit with its deep stirrings of a feminist spiritual yearning that echoed out into an enigmatic void. René Girard and Paul Ricoeur gave me hermeneutical tools for approaching questions of violence and narrative respectively. I was beginning to dig and to delve in the tangled undergrowth and loamy subsoil of the unconscious beneath the



ordered mental landscape of the Cartesian and Kantian subject and his feminist daughters of the Enlightenment – rebellious daughters perhaps, but still of the same genetic lineage, even though they filtered that rationalising, moralising, masculine subject through the soft focus lenses of relationality, desire and embodiment. And through it all, the Virgin smiled her enigmatic smile and teased and seduced me along the pathways of art, mystical theology and popular devotion. She too seemed to find the endeavours of the theological establishment faintly ridiculous, and the feeling was mutual. If doing a PhD on feminist theology constituted the death knell of any academic career, combining that with Marian studies was beyond the pale.

### Delving into Difference

Let me explore in a little more depth the differences between Ursula's perspective and mine, because I think these point to vital issues all scholars of religion and theology face with regard to world views and approaches to knowledge. These are subtle differences, and perhaps they are as much a question of style and emphasis as of content and substance. Certainly, the fundamental values that shape Ursula's world are also my values. We are both academics who put a very high value on our families and friendships as well as our careers, we are both practising Catholics who hold our faith dear in spite of its many failings, and the integrity and fidelity of Ursula's relationships and ideas have made her a role model for me. Yet even as we share so many visions and values, Ursula and I tread different intellectual paths.

Here is a quotation that gives a flavour of Ursula's visionary and inspirational style – a style that has made her a popular speaker and writer among many seeking a more interconnected and hopeful way of being in the world:

In today's postmodern society new ideas about transformation and integration, about embodiment, inclusiveness of language and praxis, about the re-imagining and renaming of Ultimate Reality abound. And so does a growing sense of the interdependence and sacredness of all life, and of our special human relationship to the whole earth and the cosmos. To develop a *holistic, integral spirituality* which can respond to our new situation demands creative and critical rethinking of our traditions. Too often spirituality has been understood like a solid, reassuring fortress, clearly demarcated by the boundaries of tradition, narrowly defined and unchanging. But it is much more helpful to approach spirituality through the image of the journey, as something to be explored and ventured, as a process of growth and transformation. (King, 1998, 108)

Twenty years later, this hymn to the potential of the postmodern bears little resemblance to the world we inhabit. Ursula evaluates postmodernity from a perspective shaped by the progressive and optimistic *zeitgeist* of liberal modernity. She acknowledges the challenges and risks posed by the loss of meaning and the economic and political injustices of our times (cf. King, 2009), but her version of postmodernity remains connected to a metanarrative. This is a universalising vision which, even as it acknowledges

differences of cultures, religions and histories, gathers all together in one shared vision for the world, rooted in a boundless optimism about our human capacity for self-improvement

There are indeed significant minorities in all religious traditions who aspire to the kind of global transformation that Ursula envisions, but too often they are an educated elite – though Ursula herself is critical of such elitism and calls for greater political and social participation in the processes of change. I do not have such faith in the power of optimistic spirituality to change the world. I find myself digging for nuggets of gold and shards of hope amidst the dereliction and disintegration of modernity, rather than fixing my gaze on that transcendent vision of a new global order emerging through the collective consciousness of the world's spiritual seekers. The spirituality that gives me hope is not holistic and integral but messy, painful and ephemeral, often clinging on in situations where there is nothing to hope for but hope itself. I think for example of religious sisters I know who work in the Congo and face the daily challenge of rape, murder and maternal and infant death, and yet who manifest a joy that comes from some profound source beyond optimism – a source I would call grace. I am not sure they would understand the language of global transformation, and I doubt that they are optimistic about the future, but they would understand the power and indeed absolute necessity of hope. Perhaps optimism has to do with politics and activism, whereas hope has to do with eschatology and patience.

Postmodernity trails violence in its wake, both in its optimistic and pessimistic versions. The bright promise of a better future after modernity has little to say to the growing numbers of marginalised and disenfranchised communities who have gained little from the neo-liberal enterprise of globalisation, and who have little to lose by destroying it. Such alienated individuals and communities are turning to religious and nationalist ideologies, signalling the rise and rise of those who seek a 'solid, reassuring fortress, clearly demarcated by the boundaries of tradition, narrowly defined and unchanging'. These movements are fuelled by fear and insecurity, they are spread through channels of violence, prejudice and divisiveness – those channels of communication that the internet has opened up, which can be and often are channels for peacemaking and transformation, but which are more often channels for misogyny, racism and the dark underground trade in humans, drugs and arms that oozes just out of sight through the worldwide web.

'Spirituality' is not immune from these forces. It can be malevolent as well as benevolent. Like desire, we have to explore its sources, its effects and its fruits if we are to evaluate it. It is because I find myself drawn to explore these dark undercurrents and destabilizing forces that I think my work has followed a different trajectory from Ursula's.

In its more pessimistic forms, postmodernity has deconstructed the very values and institutions that might enable us to share a vision of a meaningful and better world, and this too shares some responsibility for the recent crises in the western democracies. (The crises are ongoing for those in the global South). It offers us a world of fragmented and fractured narratives, of fake

news and alternative facts, and it has seeded itself and found a fertile culture in which to grow in the performative parodies of postmodernist elites. Ursula does not belong in that category. When she uses the term 'postmodern', she is not referring to Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian psycholinguistics, Zizekian cynicism and satire, to the subalterns and others of postcolonial discourse, to the polymorphous fluidity of postmodern approaches to gender. She looked askance at me when I began to drift towards Lacan, Irigaray and Girard in my studies. Yet while I continue to wrest meaning and insight from such postmodern approaches – albeit filtered through the mystical sacramentality of some aspects of the Catholic theological tradition – I also recognise that postmodernism has been a lethal parasite on western intellectual and social life. It has attached itself to profoundly important and enduring visions that have been the guiding lights of our human quest for beauty, goodness, justice and truth, and leached them of their meaning. It has produced a marketplace of obscure and irrelevant 'discourses', of tunnel-visioned specialists and experts in nothing worth knowing. All this I acknowledge, and yet I remain a postmodernist at heart – not because it helps me to see the light, but because it helps me to discern what shapes there might be lurking in the darkness, and that is why I understand postmodernity in a different way from Ursula.

If I quote the opening paragraph of my book, *Theology After Postmodernity*, it becomes clear that this is something of an underground movement in relation to mainstream feminism – a burrowing through tunnels of repression and desire that threatens the very foundations of knowledge:

Desire, its means, and its ends. Desire is the beginning and end of all human life—the energy behind every action, the love within every act of compassion, the urge within every act of violence. Our hearts yearn for the living God, and this makes us the most mysterious of creatures, even to ourselves—the most wondrous and the most dangerous of species. Desire inspires the best and the worst we are capable of, and it confuses us as to the nature of both. It flows through the furrows of the imagination between heaven and hell, populated by angels and demons, home to dreams and nightmares, to the brightest of hopes and the most dreadful of horrors. It is the medium wherein the souls of our medieval forebears swam in an oceanic creation of porous boundaries and teeming spirits. Today, it is the buried labyrinth deep within the Freudian soul, wherein God lies unconscious amidst our banished faith and our futile hopes. (Beattie, 2013, 1)

I describe the book as 'a long and winding journey through the labyrinths of desire':

Hence its plunging beneath the surface into alien worlds, where some visceral ooze of desire is home to creatures of the deep, to life forms that have evolved to flourish far below the flattened landscapes of our modern minds, eluding the sterile glare of rationalism, fleeing from the softened gaze of romanticism. ... It is a book about the cost of

becoming modern. It is a book about the cost of losing our souls, and the grace of finding them again. (Beattie, 2013, 1-2)

When Ursula read it, she chastised me for not understanding enough about the varieties of desire!

Postmodernity does create spaces for the kind of hopeful visions that Ursula describes – as Leonard Cohen sings in his famous *Anthem*, it's the cracks that let the light get in. Postmodernity offers us a cracked and broken vista. There are new and hopeful movements seeding themselves in the crevices, but postmodernism can destroy shared values and narratives and leave nothing in their wake but alienated and isolated individuals searching for meaning. This destruction of collective and shared narratives allows monolithic corporate powers to grow, unchecked by the fragile values of neighbourly love, altruism, respect and humility that all religions seek to nurture, and indeed by the fear of judgement and damnation that can effectively reign in some of the excesses of the proud, the ambitious and the greedy. The challenge is how we reconstruct or reclaim these narratives and, while I value and learn from Ursula's approach, I still cannot overlook the gathering forces of a darker future.

It would be simplistic to say that I am an Augustinian pessimist and Ursula is a Thomist optimist, but perhaps that duality of *amor mundi* and *contemptus mundi* marks the marginal spaces of our relationship, where I tend to walk on the dark side and Ursula entices me into the sun. My shadows can obscure the bright vitality and optimism that Ursula so revels in, but perhaps the sun can dazzle us and prevent us from seeing the hazards and threats that lurk in the shadows. Yet I would not be the theologian I am today without thirty years of listening to, learning from, disagreeing with, and above all loving Ursula.

What will survive of us is love, says poet Philip Larkin, in words from 'An Arundel Tomb'. Ursula is a scholar of love, a scholar who loves, a loving scholar, mother, wife and friend, and therefore she is, for me, the fully alive woman in whom the glory of God can be seen – to paraphrase Irenaeus.

In Theodore Zeldin's book, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, he writes of those women who, throughout history, have been catalysts for change by engineering new encounters, weaving new relationships and nurturing new visions through interventions that often go unrecognized in the writing of history. Zeldin writes of how the chemical discovery of catalysts in the nineteenth century sparked new imaginative possibilities in terms of human encounters and relationships, highlighting the importance of the role of the third party. He writes:

The idea of catalysis gives intermediaries a new status. Previously, they were mere links or hyphens, supplying needs felt by others. As catalysts, by contrast, they have an independent existence and purpose: they can create new situations and transform people's lives by bringing them together, without having any arrogant pretensions for themselves. To be a catalyst is the ambition most appropriate for those

who see the world as being in constant change, and who, without thinking that they can control it, wish to influence its direction. (Zeldin, 1998, 155)

Ursula has spent far more of her academic career nurturing the writings and careers of others than she has doing her own research and ploughing her own furrow. She writes prolifically, but her publications are not showy attempts at scholarly originality and innovation aimed at a few specialists. They are enthusiastic and warm celebrations of the ideas and people who inspire her, from the great medieval mystics to the voices of women, Hinduism, and of course Teilhard. She has written movingly on the spirituality of ageing, once again using her own experience of the challenges and opportunities of the ageing process to offer insight and wisdom to others (King, 1999). She was one of a group of Catholic academics who started Catherine of Siena Virtual College in 2007, an online college offering studies in theology, religion and gender to women in the global South. In 2016, the renamed Catherine of Siena College began a new phase of life when it moved to the University of Roehampton, and I became Director. My career continues to be shaped by Ursula's initiatives and visions.

Ursula has been midwife to a new generation of feminist theologians, and we in our turn are handing on what we have learned from her and bringing to it our own perspectives, contexts and visions. The freedom to do that, the freedom to break free of the endless footnotes, fretful pedantries and disciplinary confines of the modern academy is largely thanks to scholars like her. Whatever our theological differences, if there are any deep qualities in my own life as a theologian, if I have made any small contribution in the fields of 'spirituality', 'empowerment' and 'transformation', they are in no small part due to Ursula's influence and inspiration.

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