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THE POSTMODERN WOMAN’S CONDITION AND CATHOLICISM: FEMINISM OR FEMINISMS?

Abstract

Today the Catholic Church is seen from one “part” of the Western feminism, as the last bastion of male chauvinism where its closure to the emancipation of women is often associated with the secular tradition of the Church. And Mary, the mother of Jesus, becomes the subject of different assessments by postmodern feminism. This article is highlighted that feminism, in our Western countries, is not a homogeneous body, but it has at least two very different currents; radical feminism and new feminism. Luce Irigaray (the famous feminist author) offers us a meeting point between the two types of feminisms in her book *Il Mistero di Maria (The Mystery of Mary)*, published in 2010 in Italian, but never translated into English. The topic of her book is very close to the Catholic view on the emancipation of women developed after the sixties.

Keywords: radical feminism, new feminism, Catholicism, postmodernism

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POSTMODERN KADININ DURUMU VE KATOLİKLİK: FEMİNİZM Mİ FEMİNİZMLER Mİ?

Özet


Anahtar Kelimeler: radikal feminizm, yeni feminizm, Katoliklik, postmodernizm.

Introduction

This article is quite provocative for both feminists and Catholics. In fact, Catholicism is often seen as a patriarchal religion which for centuries has subjugated women, with feminism considered as a of women's rebellious movement against a male-dominated society.

From the sixties onward, feminism has claimed roles for women that are vigorously different from the stereotype of the “mother-wife” and “angel of the house” (as Virginia Woolf cited in her work, *A Room of One’s Own*) and have violently attacked the Catholic Church and accused it of misogyny and carrying out a “demonization” of the female body and its sexuality. It would therefore seem that there could be no contact points between these two positions since initial analysis is placed at opposite ends. However, with more in-depth research, we will see, in our article, that in fact this subject has several facets and new interesting perspectives.

1. Historical Context

An intelligent English writer of the eighteenth century, Jane Austen wrote in her work *Northanger Abbey*: “But history, real, solemn history, I cannot be interested in.... I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all -- it is very tiresome” (Austen 69).
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Our author makes a valid point; women appear very little in the history books we usually read in school or at university. The traditional historiography removes the female memory or at most, it confines it to the chapters devoted to custom, families and fashion. It would seem, according to historical accounts, that women are absent and irrelevant in creating a democratic and free Europe. It is good to point out the democracy and freedom that characterize Europe, not having come by chance to the West, are the results of the long and patient work of men and women who were immersed in the Christian tradition.

Four internationally renowned historians: Rodney Stark, Christopher Dawson, Thomas E. Woods Jr., and Alvin J. Schmidt have amply demonstrated in their works that one cannot consider a political, scientific, economic, cultural or social European history separate from Catholicism. Thomas E. Woods, Jr. (2005), in his work How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization stresses the idea that Catholicism is the basis of the development of Western civilization. The writer states, “Although the typical university text does not say, the Catholic Church has been the indispensable builder, without which Western civilization would not have been built” (Woods 15). We must not forget that, it is precisely in this Western civilization, immersed in the Catholic Christian tradition, like a fish in water, that women have undertaken, over the centuries, the long and arduous process of emancipation, nowadays called feminism.

It can be said that despite the accurate historical works of the four authors previously mentioned, who are all in favor of the positive influence that Catholicism has played in the development in all socio-cultural fields of Western civilization, there remains, rightly or wrongly, in different areas of our contemporary culture, a misogynist view of the Catholic Church. The Church often being identified as a patriarchal institution built on the inequality between two categories; male and female.

In the last half century, many feminist authors, as Simone de Beauvoir, Irigaray, Cixous and Dexter, have written about the negative influence of the Catholic religion on the emancipation of women. It should be pointed out that these writers were perfectly correct to criticize the patriarchal view of society by the Catholic Church. Over the centuries, the Church, made up in its hierarchy only of men, wrongly consolidated this view.

Christianity was born in a historical period (the Judeo-Roman/Greek one), where male mentality covered all areas of women’s reality. Certainly, from the origins of Judeo-Christian practices until modern times, the relationship between men and women has been of the patriarchal type. This was justified and supported by a male interpretation of the Bible, which for centuries led women to live in a marginalized and often servile relation to men. We had to
wait until the Second Vatican Council (1962-64) to see the first steps of the Catholic Church towards a greater recognition of the dignity of women in all fields, cultural, social and religious. Suffice it to note that the document on the Interpretation of the Bible by the Catholic Church including its feminist biblical hermeneutic approach, is dated just 1994.

Despite these new openings of Catholic Church towards women, today the Catholic Church is seen from one “part” of the Western feminism, as the last bastion of male chauvinism where its closure to the emancipation of women is often associated with the secular tradition of the Church. But to understand how one part of postmodern feminism still maintains such a negative view of the relationship between Catholicism and woman it is important to highlight the influence of postmodern culture on feminism.

2. Postmodern Culture and Women Condition

Aristotle, in his work Poetics, and Plato, in his work Republic, based their quest of true and meaning of life, carefully about the relationship between the subject (myself), the object (which is outside of myself) and, to be more precise, the Subject (with a capital “S”, who is to be understood as Logos, or God). In the course of the historical development of philosophical Western thought, these three elements were always present, but they assumed different value depending on the author who considered the topic. For example, Aristotle and Plato put more emphasis on the object, Kant placed more on the subject and Schiller and Hegel put more importance on the Subject.

A radical change in these perspectives came at the end of the 19th century when Nietzsche stated, Gott ist Tot (God is Dead) in his work, Also Sprach Zarathustra, declaring in this way the death of the Subject (capitol “S”). This approach continued in our postmodern time with Fredric Jameson, who stated the death of the subject (small “s”) in his work, Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of late Capitalism. At the end, out of the three fundamental elements of Western philosophy, only the object survives, but in this case, it is now considered to be only a commodity. In fact, there has been a “commodification of objects” (Jameson 9) in a globalized society run by the market and the media with a general integration of aesthetic concerns in the production of goods. Another author, Baudrillard, in his work, Simulacra and Simulation, emphasized even more than Jameson the creation of meaning as it applies to objects in our society, and so, in his ultimate analysis, the object - par excellence - becomes the body. Therefore, the body is now considered to be a “hyper-commodity” in a “hypermarket” (Jameson 75) where consumption, production and the media are the new pagan gods. The body is like an object to be controlled and monitored by the power elite, as Michel Foucault states in his work,
Surveillance and Punishment, and it is viewed as a product, a commodity to be marketed in postmodernism.

Another of Jameson’s ideas that is very relevant for our article is the concept of the “waning of affect”. The author takes as an example the comparison of two works of art: one of Van Gogh, “A Pair of Boots” and the other of Warhol, “Diamond Dust Shoes”. Jameson explains that if the farmer’s shoes in Van Gogh’s painting require an act of interpretation (in light of a symptom of some vaster reality which replaces it as ultimate truth), the ballerina’s shoes in Warhol’s work - taken as a symbol of postmodern art - remain superficial and mysterious; “they do not speak to us at all,” and they act as “dead objects” and fetishists. What we are witnessing with Warhol is what Jameson calls the “waning of affect in postmodernism culture” (10), regarding not only the object, but also our society. It thus creates a kind of alienation of human beings such as we would experience, for example, when we entered the lobby of a monumental modern hotel.

The elimination of a truth that transcends the human being, the “death of the subject” and the consequential “waning of affect” have led both women and men in modern society to that desperate cry of alienation immortalized by Munch in his work, “The Scream”. In the screaming figure (of Munch’s work), with an unclear gender distinction, we see more of the desperation of women than of men, due not only to the increased objectification of women’s bodies, but even to a more marked suffering and solitude (for natural physiological reasons) caused by the “waning of affect” in an alienating postmodern society.

Suffering and solitude which generate insecurity in a sentimental relationship are what Zygmunt Bauman (sociologist and philosopher of Jewish origin) defined as liquid love. That is: a love related to the fragility of the emotional bonds, in which it emphasizes the transience and consumerism that satisfies a momentary need, and then disappears. In our liquid modernity based on production and re-production the body, when considered as an object, is the center of interest and philosophical speculation in a male-dominated society. In this situation, women, having no models with which to compare themselves other than those generated by men, fight the battle for emancipation through their own bodies.

Women’s bodies have for centuries borne all the attacks of Western culture (supported by a patriarchal interpretation of the Bible), and now women are rebelling and asking for autonomy outside of the narrow constraints of the patriarchal world. Their own bodies are all that remain for women when they are deprived of any role other than that of a commodity to be commercialized in post-modern society. The female body has become an object to be exploited.
in the voyeuristic and consumer based market that is imposed by the mass media. One must add to this the negative influence that, for over a century, the pseudo-scientific thinking of Freud’s psychoanalysis had on society’s attitudes towards women’s bodies. In fact, the Freudian concepts of the Oedipus complex, penis envy and castration anxiety pushed women even harder against the ropes – forcing them to fight with all their strength to obtain a central and significant role in a society and culture that had always denied these to them.

The accumulated suffering of women over the centuries exploded into a veritable declaration of war against both the male-dominated society’s schemes and the Catholic religion in literary works such as, *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir, *The Laugh of Medusa*, by Helene Cixous, and, *Body Against Body*, “Divine Women”, by Luce Irigaray. Common to all these authors is the struggle to achieve independence from the patriarchal world – even through the free use of their bodies and an exploration of sexuality outside of marriage. In their works, there is the search for identity outside of the traditional models of wife, mother or nun and for Irigaray she also expresses a desire to have a female deity to whom to refer. This fight is definitely a strong signal to men that women want to be seen in a different way from the “Angel of the house”. Women no longer accept the role of the victim – or, “the scapegoat” – of our patriarchal society, and they are struggling to come into their own power.

In the last decades of our postmodern era, an epochal change took place in feminism. In Western countries not all women agreed with this struggling against the male-dominated society and the Catholic religion; because of this we can no longer talk about feminism, but rather of feminisms.

3. What is Feminism in our Post-Modern Time?

Feminism, in addition to being a social transformative movement to change a situation deemed unfair and stifling for women, is also a theoretical reflection. It analyzes situations that discriminate against women, it recovers and enhances the thought of women, reflects on the nature of the female subject and imagines a world in which “sexual difference” finds a place.

We state that there are many currents within feminism, but two are the most easily identifiable:

- *Radical feminism or feminism of difference* (Irigaray) believes that today's society is a male society, which therefore provides a partial model of humanity. It claims that the representation of the female figure is the result of a male point of view that has led to the creation of public and decision-making symbols that excluded the reality of women.
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- **New feminism or feminism of complementarity** claims access to society with a practice of equality between men and women emphasizing the differences without claiming any superiority of men over women nor women over men.

  **Radical feminism.** In Simone Pillon’s work *Le Radici Storico Filosofiche dell’Indiferentismo Sessuale* (The Philosophical-Historical Roots of Sexual Indifference), we can find the ideological basis of the first type of feminism. Descartes (1596-1650), who re-examined the themes of the Platonic soul-body dichotomy, eliminated centuries of Christian cultural work based on the unity between body and soul where the human being is an incarnate soul called to transcend the earthly life. Descartes theorized that the human being was not an intrinsic unity but a division. According to this thought: human beings are *res cogitans*, (partially devoted to thought) and *res extensa*, (partially attached to a material life). The body - according to Descartes - is simple matter, governed by the laws of mechanics and it led him to compare it to a clock.

  According to Pillon, from 1650 this thought was refined by other thinkers as Georg Hegel (1770-1831), Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895). This last author argued that at the end the duality, body-soul, or *res extensa* - *res cogitans* was also found in every human relationship where every human being could relate with a *something other than itself*. Engels in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* stated that this dynamic between the self and the other was always a dynamic, so-called dialectics (conflict), and he believed that the first conflict was the relationship between man and woman, between the male and the female. So much so that, according to Engels, in every wedding you could find the submission of women to men and the family was the worst way to organize.

  Engels noted that only when all legal discrimination fell, the true relationship emerged between man and woman. So it is clear that in the family the woman played the role in society that belonged to the proletarian and the husband - the role of the bourgeois. Engels continued to claim that men and their roles as fathers, brothers and husbands dominated women who were wives, sisters and daughters. And that the only way forward for women to gain their freedom from this cycle of domination was to rebel from the institution of family by refusing to marry and demanding their place in society as individuals and equals. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, according to Pillon, this theory ripened and became a political movement when it encountered the beginnings of the feminist movement.

  From the beginnings of this female movement to the present day, feminism has undergone several stages of change. The most important ones occurred in the 60s with the
sexual revolution that flowed into sixty-eight protests; and in the 90s with the queer paradigm of Judith Butler. At the basis of these phases there was the work of Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex (1949), which proposed an anthropological change of the concept of woman. Beauvoir summed it up in this famous “Women are not born: they become made” (271). Sex is determined by the nature, whilst gender is socially constructed from culture, regardless of sexual data by which a person is instead globally characterized. From this moment the goal of the feminist movement was not only to achieve equal career and work opportunities to men; but also to eliminate the obstacle of maternity and the Catholic moral limitation regarding the female sexuality.

Even if the goal of the feminist movement broadened over the last 50 years, various thinkers have understood that the real issue at stake in human relations (and in particular between men and women) was the “dual relationship”. The man developed from the path of history understands that the real problem of every ontology is the relationship with the other (Other); the duality. The relationship with God, the relationship with other human beings, the relationship with the world can be carriers of problems and conflict. “Hell is other people” said Simone de Beauvoir’s partner, the existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre who was awarded Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964. The other is always hell, the other does not think like you, the other is different from you and puts you in crisis. Therefore, according to this way of thinking, for a world without conflict, we must destroy the duality. “Two” should no longer exist, there must be only “one” which rises its individuality to the universal oneness and abrogates any natural difference and otherness. In post-feminist context this thought was developed in the “Theory of Gender”, in which Judith Butler was one of the prime exponents.

New Feminism. Even if new feminism held in common with radical feminism, the search for full recognition of equal dignity between man and woman would be different in the path that it follows. In fact, the two feminist movements were very distant at the time when radical feminism accepted the idea that in order to reach the emancipation of woman she must fight with all her might against the supremacy of the male (the other), to the point of claiming not only equal dignity but identical identity.

For Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) in his book Never Without the Other (published in 1993), the one who is different from myself (the other) is not to be considered an hell as it was for Sartre, but as a source of growth for human being. The author writes:

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What is different threatens us. So let's do everything to clear the tracks; others, death, God, all that designates a break that must be blurred. In order to be identical to ourselves, we need to bring all disparities into resemblance. Chain reactions tend to disguise alterity as this emerges in the field of experience.... (Certeau 86).

Certeau expressed in these few lines a natural attitude of the human being that was to try to apply to the other human being, stereotypes and judgments that are part of its own cultural and social baggage. This was with the aim to frame the other according to categories that may not belong to the other; as if it were an attempt to colonize someone who is different, because it is of another color, religion, or sex.

In another work titled *Il Cristianesimo in Frantumi* (*Shattered Christianity*) our author writes: “In personal, national, social, historical and up to the relationship with the Third World the other is the postulate of conquest” (66). For Certeau, there was, however, constantly an attempt to subdue the other (the different) to our perception of what was right and good because we rejected a priori the difference. The author wrote in *Never without the Other*:

But there is an undefined preliminary: to overcome that instinct of society and security that rejects the difference. Believing that it is possible to ignore or eliminate it would be a dream. Homogeneity is always and only a utopia....

Victor Segalen said “There is no mystery in a homogeneous world”. Certainly where there is no union, the difference is inert; it has no longer a fermenting sense. But the union becomes sterile and insignificant if it no longer re-emerges from the difference that puts it into question (Certeau116).

Certeau pre-announced a different view of the mainstream postmodern thought that was; the difference is fundamental to questioning one's self. It is a ferment of sense and opportunity when is no longer accepted as a danger but as a source of growth, in the face of every effort to impose “a uniformity to which the egotism of the powerful, the conformism of the weak, or the ideology of the utopian would seek to impose on us”. This thought, which puts its foundations in a non-antagonistic relationship between the other and the self, differs from the existentialist thought of radical feminism, principally for the different meaning given to a person and to an individual. In the new feminism the other is intended as a source of growth and the concept of person, very different from that of an individual, is based upon the recognition of the other as “you” and oneself as part of “us”.

Following the comparison we have done by analyzing the works of several Western authors and researchers, we can now attest that feminism is not a homogeneous body. It has at
least two main different currents but with a common goal: the realization of absolute dignity for woman.

Now restricting our search to the specific context of the relationship between postmodern woman’s condition and Catholicism, we can see the appearance in literature of a possible new meeting point. Indeed, Irigaray found a point of contact between the two currents of feminism through a postmodern analysis of the figure of the Virgin Mary as shown in the next paragraph.

4. A Joining Bridge; The Mystery of Mary

The secular materialist culture (originated around 1800 in Germany) considered that the development of Western thought was negatively influenced by the Christian religion. And in particularly, it delivers a strong critique to the faith in Mary, the mother of Jesus, promoted by the Catholic Church and strengthened through its various dogmas.

The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) in his work *The Essence of Christianity* (1854) lays the foundation for what will be the atheist-materialist Western thought. In the following passage taken from Umberto Eco’s work – *Storia della Filosofia (History of Philosophy)* Vol. III, Feuerbach expresses his idea about the Virgin Mary:

> The Virgin Mary is the expression of the fact that the individual, at a pure level of consciousness doesn’t want to be subjected to logic and the law of science, but wants the will of imagination and heart. Man wants the virgin’s figure as a symbol of chastity and purity but also the mother figure as a symbol of love and filial affection but it must be untouched and spotless that means private from instinctual and sexual connotations (U. Eco 23).

Thus Feuerbach laid the foundation of the atheist materialist thought emphasized by the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche in his “Got ist Tot” (God is dead). In the twentieth century this thought was followed by the existentialism to which radical feminism referred to.

Virginity and chastity are values hardly understood by men and women in our secularized society. Only in a transcendental vision of life are they accepted. Thus Mary becomes the subject of different assessments by part of some feminist movements. They claim that the cult of Mary is functional to the reproduction of all forms of patriarchy and to the moral justification of subordination in which the Church has relegated women together with the process of blaming the female gender and in particular their sexuality.

For Catholics the distinction between material and spiritual dimension does not exist and Mary becomes the gateway between infinite in the finite. Without this female gateway God
could not have achieved his plan of salvation for men and women, considered in their entirety of spirit-body. On this subject the Byzantine iconography is very helpful. In the museum/church in St. Savior in Cora in Istanbul the iconography of Mary and the adult Jesus face each other at the entrance of the church. The mosaic of Mary shows, in a simple way that great theological truth of the Infinite (God) inside the finite (Mary). The figure of Mary holds the image of the child Jesus in a circle and written in Greek are the words Chora tou achorretou (She is the one who contained the uncontainable).

Luce Irigaray, French feminist writer and philosopher, has dealt with the theme of women's dignity, always keeping one eye on transcendence. She has analyzed the question by linking it to a truth that goes beyond the mere objective reality. It should be noted that in one of her early works Divine Women, published in 1984, Irigaray complains about the lack of a transcendental dimension for woman that is similar to that of men. The lack of a female trinity as a role model made it very difficult for her to develop her subjectivity, or to find her own path in life.

We can deduce this from statements taken from Irigaray’s work Divine Women (in Sex and Genealogy);

- God is created out of man’s gender.
- It is true that Christianity tells us that God is in three persons. Three manifestations and the third stage of manifestation occurs as a wedding between the spirit and the bride. Is this supposed to inaugurate the divine for, in, with woman? The female?
- If women have no God, they are unable to either commutate or commune with one another.
- There is no woman God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit.
- The most human and the most divine goal woman can conceive is to become a man.
- The virgin relationship with the Father always remains in the shadow.
- The Father is not a single entity. He is made up of three. The Virgin is alone in her sex.
- “Where faith in the Mother of God sinks, there also sinks faith in the Son of God, and in God as the Father. The Father is a truth only where the Mother is a truth. Love is in and by essentially feminine in its nature” (Feuerbach).
- The divinity of woman is still hidden, veiled (Irigaray 71-72).
The author places at the basis of her work *Divine Women* a personal interpretation of the Bible and doctrine of the Catholic Church. It is worth noting that on these points, (clearly expressed by the writer) lies the feminism of difference.

In one of her latest works *The Mystery of Mary*, published in 2010 and never translated into English, Irigaray will take on a completely new position. She leaned towards Catholic assumptions about women and their interpretation, contradicting almost two decades of publication of her works on the emancipation of women related to secular materialistic and essentialist thought.

To confirm this, we report part of the interview that Irigaray had with the journalist Patrizia Melluso for the online Italian magazine *Fuoricentroscampia* on the occasion of the publication of her book *The Mystery of Mary*. Irigaray stated:

Mary is the one who gives new meaning to the world thanks to her alliance with flesh that is animated by a breath that is not only vital, but even spiritual….

Mary's silence (in the Bible) testifies to her belonging to a less patriarchal tradition than ours, in which the spoken word has not yet supplanted life – especially that of the flesh. Mary's silence could mean a way of preserving intimacy with herself – a way to prevent becoming lost in words - particularly into a discourse that is not her own….

I insist that Mary's role is not limited to being a child’s mother but it is first of all to be a woman faithful to herself and who takes care of her deification. Finally, I explain how a figure, such as that of Mary, represents or prefigures that of “A woman who could be a bridge between the past, present and future. A bridge between all cultures of the world due to her spiritual virginity, that is, the preservation of a living breath and blow irreducible to anyone or anything”.

Irigaray recognized in the affair of the girl of Nazareth a possible path of female freedom. A virgin woman was, for our author, a woman who was not named in relation to men and thus presented herself as a symbol of female autonomy. For Irigaray, Mary represented not only an aspect of symbolic independence for women, but also the possibility of establishing strong relationships with the “others” without undermining her own differences. *Mother* and * virgin* terms then earned a very different meaning, since they allowed Mary not only to relate to the ones different from her, but also to not lose her intimacy and to protect herself.
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Conclusion

From the beginning of humanity woman's uniqueness was her natural capacity to procreate a new life. This uniqueness has provoked (over the centuries) the envy of men who did everything to suffocate women’s sexuality. In the 1960's, what took place from sexual liberation was a change unforeseen by women. In fact, the freedom to decide on one’s own body led them to where we are with regards surrogacy.

Only a few years before when women suffered only sexual commodification, they now have their motherhood for sale. In fact in our consumer society, the mother figure can be split into three profitable parts: pregnant woman on behalf of a third person, supplier of eggs and the social mother. It is a new form of patriarchy, the last offensive against the woman and her body, addressed to what is unique in woman: that is her motherhood and her relationship with her son.

Surrogacy made even the more radical feminists appear disorientate and some of radical feminists are now rediscovering in Western countries the Catholic Church. Since it is not linked to any lobby of power, it is a strong barrier against the omnipotence of postmodern neoliberalsim.

Even if radical feminism is in difficulty on the issue of surrogacy, we nevertheless still need to give credit to this kind of feminism for having strongly placed to the fore (from the very beginning) the question of the dignity of women in both secular and religious institutions. The struggle over the years by radical feminists against a male-dominated society and narrow religious morality has certainly awakened the Catholic Church from its too long torpor. Different is the case of new feminism (that certainly closer to the Catholic Church in its methods of promoting the dignity of women) is the female voice most heard by the Vatican.

Irigaray in her work Il Mistero di Maria (The Mystery of Mary) stretched her hand out towards new feminism and to the Catholic Church; and by calling herself “mother” and identifying herself as the figure of Mary, the Church can no longer continue to be deaf to the voice of women. Irigaray created a path that the writer hoped could be undertaken by all women, beyond any ideology and belief, and that it could be the basis of a new humanization process in Western society.

To conclude our work, it is no longer, in our opinion, a question of radical feminism or new feminism, but a matter of the fundamental right for postmodern women to have their full dignity. Unity in diversity between man and woman, in the respect of the physical and mental (body and spirit) specifics of each one of them, should be the future for a New Humanism in an inclusive Western society where the word feminism no longer makes sense.


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