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Fragments for Fractured Times: What Feminist Practical Theology brings to the Table¹

Introduction

In this inaugural lecture, I want to speak of my vision of the theological task. I shall focus in particular on the contributions of feminist and practical theologies, gathering fragments² from their endeavours to bring to the table of theological enquiry. I do so in order to address the larger vocation of theology represented by those of you gathered here who would not identify as either feminist or practical theologians. For I see practical and feminist theologies not so much as discrete species of theology as theology in particular mode or perspective. They highlight the vocation of *all* theology to be concerned with the lives and practices of ordinary believers and with the imperative of gender justice.

First, I shall locate the theological task in the context of times which I shall describe as fractured. Within the range of possible theological responses to such fracturing, I shall highlight what I see to be distinctive stances of feminist and practical theologies. I shall then offer a series of metaphors of theology which have been common in both practical and feminist theologies: metaphors of the web, tapestry and quilt, drawn from women's age-old crafts (which have, themselves, been marginalized from patriarchal traditions of the 'high arts' and reclaimed by contemporary feminists).³ I shall take what I regard as one worked example of feminist practical theology, Judy Chicago's iconic art installation, *The Dinner Party*, which incorporates women's craft work of various kinds within the conceit of a dinner party for women from across millenia. *The Dinner Party*, I will suggest, can highlight key features of what feminist practical theology brings to the table of theological practice. The notion of 'table theology' has been a key concern in feminist theology and liturgy (for example, in Letty M. Russell's *Church in the Round*,⁴ in which she develops the metaphor of the 'round table', the 'kitchen table' and the 'welcome table' as alternatives to the hierarchical 'master's tables' which have governed the church); it has also been a recurrent

¹ I am indebted to Stephen Burns, Jane Craske, Dirk-Martin Grube, Jo Jones and Rosie Miles for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this lecture.

² For the use of the metaphor of 'fragments' in recent theological discourse, see Jacques Pohier, *God in Fragments* (SCM, 1985); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (Zone Books, 1994); Guiseppe Ruggieri and Miklós Tomka (eds.), *The Church in Fragments: Towards What Kind of Unity?* (Concilium, Orbis, 1997); Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Blackwell, 1995); Enda McDonagh, *Faith in Fragments* (Columba Press, 1996); Teresa Berger, *Fragments of Real Presence: Liturgical Traditions in the Hands of Women* (Crossroad, 2005); Duncan B Forrester, *Theological Fragments: Essays in Unsystematic Theology* (T&T Clark, 2005).

³ See, for example, Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (Women's Press, 1984) and the recent resurgence of 'craftivism' by young feminists such as Betsy Greer (ed.), *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014) and Sarah Corbett, *How to be a Craftivist: The Art of Gentle Protest* (Unbound, 2017).

⁴ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

motif in my own work.⁵ The table is, of course, a Eucharistic image of ancient lineage and calls to mind many classic images such as Rublev's famous icon of the Trinity and Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper. As I seek to gesture towards the table that Wisdom sets in our midst,⁶ I shall aim to bring a variety of dishes to the banquet in the form of particular examples of feminist practical theological scholarship that have been significant in my own journey. I will raise a number of toasts to particular individuals who have meant much to me. Finally, I shall speak of some of my own distinctive methods in theology, highlighting the use of qualitative research, poetry and liturgy as tools for dismantling and reconfiguring the patriarchal symbolic imaginary. Whilst this particular combination of genres is personal, there are many others whose work employs a similar, if not greater, range; and here I raise my first toast to Revd Professor Frances Young, who has been closely associated with Queen's for many years, and whose work demonstrates the ways in which systematic and practical theological concerns can enrich each other.⁷

I am not going to offer definitions of either feminist or practical theology at this point, as I hope that my understanding of both will emerge as I proceed. I will simply say that my hope for this chair is that it will promote and strengthen practical theology in the academy and in the churches, from the perspective of feminism and related discourses. Whilst I am well aware of many forms of religious feminism outside the church and beyond Christianity, my own commitment is to work within a confessional context, in critical as well as constructive mode, functioning as 'the irritant in the eye/ Of the church', 'the cracked lens through which it needs to see',⁸ reflecting back its own brokenness.

Feminist practical theology – formed out of the meeting and mingling of feminist and practical theologies – has been slow to emerge, only becoming established in the English-speaking world in the past few decades. As far as I know, the Queen's Chair in Feminist Practical Theology is the first of its kind in Europe, although it stands in an honourable line of European chairs of feminist theology – held, for example, by Catherina Halkes (Nijmegen), Mary Grey (Nijmegen, Southampton and Lampeter), Riet Bons-Storm (Groningen), Ann Loades (Durham) and Lisa Isherwood (Winchester) – as well as chairs in practical theology, represented by our own Dean, Ruard Ganzevoort and by prominent European and American

⁵ For example, chapter 8 'In Search of a Round Table', in *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003); 'Banquet', a number of graces and 'Blessing at the table' in *Praying Like a Woman* (SPCK, 2004); 'Mary bakes bread', 'Mary celebrates the eucharist', 'Eve and Mary in the garden' in *The Book of Mary* (SPCK, 2007); 'Presiding like a woman' in Nicola Slee and Stephen Burns (eds.), *Presiding Like a Woman* (SPCK, 2010): 7-8; and chapter 3, 'The table of women' in *Seeking the Risen Christa* (SPCK, 2011).

⁶ Proverbs 9: 1-6.

⁷ Young's commitment to serious scholarly study of early Christianity is enriched by the genres of poetry and preaching, and given sharp critical focus by her lifelong commitment to the inclusion of disabled persons in the life of the church. This is most recently exemplified in *God's Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁸ Rosie Miles, 'So Here We Are', in Geoffrey Duncan (ed.), *Courage to Love: An Anthology of Inclusive Worship Material* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002): 78-9. See also Duncan Forrester's suggestion that '[f]ragments may be irritants (the grit in the oyster that gathers a pearl?) ... The grit stands for the awkward, probing, irritating questions that a lively theology should address to church, society and culture.' *Theological Fragments*: 17, 20.

theologians such as Duncan Forrester (Edinburgh),⁹ Elaine Graham (Manchester, Chester), Stephen Pattison (Birmingham), Friedrich Schweitzer (Tübingen), Bonnie Miller-McLemore (Vanderbilt), Mary Elizabeth Moore (Boston) and many others. I am deeply conscious of my dependence on both streams of scholarship and on many of these individuals' work and collegueship.

Fractured times

Perhaps all times between Eden and the Eschaton are fractured, but it seems to be a particular characteristic of our own era. Whichever way we turn, we witness the dismembering and fracturing of many previously taken for granted realities, what Rowan Williams has graphically described as 'a nervous breakdown in the body politic'.¹⁰ The powerful state-church compact we have known as Christendom has long been in decline, the Protestant Reformation only one obvious historical marker of its fatal wounding. Old political alliances and global power dynamics are dismantled before our eyes. The maps and borders are being rewritten in complex, shifting ways, Brexit and parallel movements in other European countries constituting one obvious, local manifestation. Larger systems such as patriarchy and colonialism, those centuries old rule of the masters, are in global decline even while they refuse to lie down, manifesting in ever new forms. The strong yet fragile body of the earth itself is in grave danger from daily rape and pillage.

Such ecological, religious and political fracturing is mirrored in the academy. Rapid expansion of the university sector in the UK has been followed by retraction in the light of austerity measures that threaten to unmake public services as we have known them. Academic disciplines themselves partake of this fracturing. Once the queen of the sciences, guaranteeing and exemplifying the unity of all knowledge under God, theology – where it exists at all in modern universities – is fragmented into ever-multiplying forms, many of which do not seem to want to talk to each other. Systematic, dogmatic, philosophical, historical, biblical, practical, public, liberation, feminist, LGBT, queer, post-colonial – these are only a few of the myriad forms that theology now takes. To narrow the focus to my own field of feminist theology itself, the forms bifurcate and multiply at a dizzying rate: Womanist, mujuerista, Asian and African women's theologies have been joined by new discourses around gender and the search for new masculinities. There have been backlash, postfeminism, postchristian and postdenominational feminist theologies.

⁹ Forrester's *Theological Fragments* offers an apologia for a piecemeal, fragmentary practical theology that can nevertheless speak to the public square. See also Marcella Althaus-Reid, 'In the Center there are no Fragments: Teologías Desencajadas (Reflections on Unfitting Theologies)', in William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton (eds.), *Public Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Honour of Duncan B Forrester* (T&T Clark, 2004): 365-83 for a searching analysis of how far a theology in fragments can challenge and subvert the hegemony of the 'centre'.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, 'A nervous breakdown in the body politic', *New Statesman* 1 May 2016, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/05/nervous-breakdown-body-politic>

All these different kinds of fracturing are symptomatic of the breakdown of grand narrative itself, the loss of a unifying symbol system which commands widespread assent, and an accompanying loss of confidence in rationality and institutional authority. Nor is the brokenness only outside us. Speaking personally, I am well aware that I come from a people of brokenness and carry their wounds within me, manifested in a series of fissures and gaps between who I am, what I say, and what I do – the lack of integrity which is a condition of humanness. The gradual disintegration of my ageing body is only one of the more obvious signs of this lack. I name such personal dissolution, not as an embarrassing addendum to the larger political and ecclesial brokenness I have been describing, but because I regard it as central to the vocation of theology. Only the ‘wounded researcher’, the ‘failed poet’,¹¹ can inhabit the ‘broken middle’ of which philosopher Gillian Rose speaks,¹² which is the only site of authentic theological practice. This is something that theologians writing out of various experiences of impairment witness to in their writings as well as their lives, calling all theology to recognize its grounding in a ‘disabled God’.¹³

Theology’s response to the fracturing of knowledge and borders

Do we regard fragmentation as a ‘predicament or an emancipation’, something to be resisted or welcomed?¹⁴ And how might theology respond to such fractured times? One, reactionary response to multiple fragmentation is to seek to reinstate a grand, meta-narrative upon the disorder. This is essentially a response of denial, frequently motivated by fear and a refusal to give up the iron grip of control. We see such a response in many forms of political and religious backlash. At the other extreme is a response which, far from denying the reality of fragmenting discourses, positively embraces the breakdown of monolithic structures. Queer and postcolonial theologies best typify this approach, in which those who have been most disadvantaged by the religiously-endorsed grand narrative, rejoice in its breakdown and revel in the fissures of the broken system, seeking not to reconcile the contradictions but to exploit and enlarge them.

I have some sympathy for both of these approaches. I recognize within myself a strong desire to fix what is broken and find security in some overarching system or story. At the same time, I am also attracted by the anarchic stance of queer theology, and my own theology is not a little informed by it. However, neither of

¹¹ Robert D. Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher: Research with Soul in Mind* (Spring Journal, 2013).

¹² Gillian Rose, *The Broken Middle: Out of Our Ancient Society* (Blackwell, 1992). See Rachel Mann’s reflections on ‘the broken middle’ in *Dazzling Darkness: Gender, Sexuality, Illness and God* (Wild Goose, 2012): 131-2 and ‘Presiding from the broken middle’, in Slee and Burns, *Presiding Like a Woman*:133-9.

¹³ Nancy Eisland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon Press, 1994). See also Wayne Morris, *Theology without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (Ashgate, 2008); John M. Hull, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person’s Conversations with the Bible* (SCM, 2010); John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (SCM, 2012); Frances Young, *Arthur’s Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (SPCK, 2014).

¹⁴ Forrester, *Theological Fragments*: 10-11.

these approaches will quite do. On the one hand, as Zygmunt Bauman asserts, 'No recipes of repairing the fissure are to be trusted; the more radical they are, the more they need to be suspected.'¹⁵ On the other hand, as Kate Soper has suggested, to 'give up on the grand narrative idea of a single truth' does not compel us to give up 'on the idea of truth as a regulative ideal'.¹⁶ Thus I want to suggest a 'third way' as the *modus operandi* of feminist practical theology – not so much a classic middle way between the two extremes as a form of oscillation, a dynamic to-ing and fro-ing between them.¹⁷

Without imposing some kind of uniformity where there is none, I think one can see some family resemblances between the diverse expressions of feminist and practical theology, which allow some generalizations to be made. Feminist and practical theologies acknowledge the fragmentation of human knowledge and systems. Indeed, feminist theology has played its own part in demolishing the superstructure of patriarchal religion which has legitimized Christendom's grand narrative (practical theology has, on the whole, been less iconoclastic, although not without critique of the church it seeks to serve). Yet, feminist practical theology looks to reconstruct from the rubble of what is fallen, gathering the scattered fragments of what diners at the tables of power have discarded, seeking to make bread out of stone.¹⁸ A characteristic stance of both feminist and practical theologies is the search for connections between the fragments within an epistemology of relationality and interconnection, a kind of to-ing and fro-ing between the overarching claims of systematic theologies, on the one hand, and an acute listening to the neglected margins, on the other. This is a theological approach that is modest yet visionary: attentive to the diversity and particularity of things. It seeks to hold each fragment up to the light for critical scrutiny but also for appreciation, finding joy in the small, fragile thing. It analyzes and responds to brokenness with realism and hopefulness, not looking to fix things so much as to hold and bear them. Refusing to impose an artificial unity upon the many fractured parts, such theologies nevertheless seek a larger whole that might be assembled from the fragments – a whole that is always ahead of us, never fully envisaged or realized.

Feminist practical theological responses

Both feminist and practical theologians of the past few decades have coined metaphors of the web to express such an epistemology and methodology of interconnectedness. Bonnie Miller McLemore adapted Anton Boisen's metaphor of the 'living human document' to speak of the 'living human web'¹⁹ as the basis

¹⁵ Bauman, *Life in Fragments*: 75.

¹⁶ Kate Soper, in Bauman, *Life in Fragments*: 6.

¹⁷ The notion of oscillation as an aspect of practical theology methodology can be found in Mark J. Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Paternoster, 2003).

¹⁸ The reference here is, of course, to the gospel story of the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30) and to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Beacon Press, 1984).

¹⁹ Bonnie J. Miller McLemore, 'The Living Web and the State of Pastoral Theology', in *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Wm B Eerdmans, 2012): 25-45.

of pastoral theology. This was an attempt to broaden pastoral theology's focus on the interpersonal dimensions of pastoral care towards a greater recognition of the sociopolitical contexts in which the pastoral encounter is rooted. Miller McLemore's metaphor of the living web was itself indebted to the work of feminist philosophers, theologians, artists and psychologists who were developing the notion of the web in a range of ways.

Catherine Keller's *From a Broken Web*²⁰ is a fine example of such feminist metaphorical revisioning. Keller surveys Western philosophy and culture from classical to contemporary times, and deconstructs the model of the separative male self, made in the image of the all-sufficient male God, upon which Western thought and culture have been based. Building on the research of Gilligan,²¹ Dinnerstein²² and Chodorow,²³ Keller charts patterns of early child-rearing which establish the male drive towards separation and autonomy, and the female self nurtured in connection and relationship. Male fear of intimacy and female fear of autonomy have tended to result from these developmental pathways, fixing gender relations in unequal and anxious co-dependence. Employing the classical myth of Arachne, the great Spider or Spinner who defeats the goddess Athena in a contest of looms, Keller offers a 'hermeneutics of connection' – not to replace Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion²⁴ upon which it depends (the work of weaving first requiring the unpicking of what has been broken, torn and ripped), but to set it within a larger vision of restoration and whole-making.²⁵ The image of the web, Keller argues, may 'claim the status of an all-embracing image, a metaphor of metaphors, not out of any imperialism, but because, as a metaphor of interconnection itself, the web can link lightly in its nodes an open multiplicity of images'.²⁶ She affirms the work of repairing the broken web as essentially religious, the tying together and binding up of 'the wounds of breaking worlds'.²⁷

Many feminist theologians and philosophers have taken up the metaphor of the web²⁸ and related metaphors of the tapestry, quilt and patchwork, employing it

²⁰ Catherine Keller, *From a Broken Web: Separation, Sexism, and Self* (Beacon Press, 1986).

²¹ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard University Press, 1982).

²² Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (Harper Colophon, 1977).

²³ Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (University of California Press, 1978).

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (Yale University Press, 1970).

²⁵ See also Michael N. Jagessar's reclamation of the figure of Anancy – who takes various animal, insect and human forms, including the spider – from oral traditions in the Caribbean, to develop a 'spinning theology' and 'Anancy hermeneutics'. While Anancy is traditionally portrayed as male in Caribbean folklore and literature, in Jagessar's writings, s/he takes a multiplicity of gendered and ethnic identities. Michael N. Jagessar, 'Spinning Texts – Anancy Hermeneutics', in Michael N. Jagessar and Anthony G. Reddie (eds.) *Black Theology in Britain: A Reader* (Equinox, 2007):181-6; and 'Spinning Theology: Trickster, Texts and Theology' in Michael N. Jagessar and Anthony G. Reddie (eds.), *Postcolonial Black British Theology: New Textures and Themes* (Epworth, 2007): 124-45.

²⁶ Keller, *Broken Web*: 218.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Although feminist theologians first coined metaphors of the web before Tim Berners-Lee's invention of the World Wide Web in 1989, contemporary feminists have not been slow to avail

to illuminate feminist spirituality,²⁹ human and divine personhood,³⁰ redemption and atonement theologies,³¹ violence against women,³² pastoral care,³³ feminist preaching,³⁴ and feminist practical research methodology.³⁵ The relational theologies of Carter Heyward,³⁶ Rita Nakashima Brock³⁷ and Mary Grey³⁸ demonstrate how the metaphor of the web can be extended to a more comprehensive model of God and divine-human relations.³⁹

Whether we are speaking of the web-making of the internet and social media, or of traditional female arts of tapestry, quilt-making and spinning, these metaphors enshrine a number of characteristics which are significant in feminist and practical theologies, beyond the core assertion of relationality and interconnectedness. They point to the materiality, artistry and collaborative nature of feminist and practical theological study. They affirm women's participation in the theological work of repairing the fabric of the world, sharing with God the work of sustaining and redeeming creation. Such metaphors also conjure feminist and practical theological ways of thinking and working that proceed via associative, evocative and lateral perspectives rather than systematic, deductive and linear thought.

Of course, metaphors of the web and the tapestry for the work of theology are not beyond critique. Their very malleability and wide-ranging application may be both a weakness and a strength. More problematically, an emphasis on relationality and connectedness can obscure the differences and conflicts between women, and it is not insignificant that relational theologies have largely

themselves of the networking opportunities of the internet to create new forms of feminist community, including online churches, synagogues and mosques, where women can converse and campaign as well as worship in virtual space. For a recent discussion, see Gina Messina-Dysert and Rosemary Radford Ruether (eds.), *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century: Technology, Dialogue, and Expanding Borders* (Routledge, 2014).

²⁹ Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite: Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition* (Abingdon Press, 1990).

³⁰ Pamela Cooper-White, *Braided Selves: Collected Essays on Multiplicity, God, and Persons* (Cascade Books, 2011).

³¹ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition* (SPCK, 1989).

³² Joan Alleluia Filemoni-Tofaeono and Lydia Johnson, *Reweaving the Relational Mat: A Christian Response to Violence Against Women From Oceania* (Equinox, 2006).

³³ Pamela Couture, 'Weaving the Web: Pastoral Care in an Individualistic Society', in *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care*, edited by Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner (Fortress, 1996): 94-106.

³⁴ Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective* (Westminster/John Knox, 1989).

³⁵ Helen Collins, 'Weaving a Web: Developing a Feminist Practical Theology Methodology from a Charismatic Perspective', in Nicola Slee, Fran Porter and Anne Phillips (eds.), *Researching Female Faith: Qualitative Research Methods* (Routledge, 2018):54-69.

³⁶ Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (University Press of America, 1982); *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (Pilgrim Press, 1984); *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1989).

³⁷ Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (Crossroad, 1988).

³⁸ Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream*.

³⁹ Sallie McFague describes a model as 'a metaphor with staying power...a metaphor that has gained sufficient scope so as to present a pattern for relatively comprehensive and coherent explanation'. In *Models of God: Theology for An Ecological, Nuclear Age* (SCM, 1988):34.

been created by white women. Black and Asian women may feel less of a need to connect with others who have been the source of their exclusion from the table. Mukti Barton's account of the racism and rejection which first-generation Black and Asian immigrants experienced when they arrived in Britain in the late 1950s and turned up at churches they expected would welcome them, makes painful reading.⁴⁰ Any account of relationality fit for purpose must grapple with the refusal of relations represented by racism, homophobia and every other exclusionary practice. As Keller herself says, 'we must avoid any naïve glorification of connection'; 'spiders remind us of... the dangers and tragedies of relation – it can ensnare, strangle, swallow and devour'.⁴¹

What feminist practical theology brings to the table

Judy Chicago's iconic feminist art installation, *The Dinner Party*,⁴² may serve as a model of the kind of approach to knowing, thinking and creating that feminist and practical theologies embody. Integrating metaphors of the web, the tapestry and the mosaic with the image of a feminist Eucharistic table, *The Dinner Party* provides a rich and evocative model of feminist practical theology.

A pioneering feminist artist who has constantly broken new ground throughout her long career, Chicago came to fame through her Dinner Party installation, created over five years with a collective of more than four hundred volunteers.⁴³ Chicago regarded the installation as a reworking of, or a 'female counterpart' to, the Last Supper, especially as visualised in Da Vinci's famous painting. The work consists of six tapestry entry banners welcoming visitors to the space, leading into the main area dominated by a massive three-sided ceremonial banquet table (the triangle chosen as a symbol of equality and one of the earliest symbols of the goddess). Place settings for thirty-nine women are arranged in three groups of thirteen, one for each wing of the table. The first wing of the table features women from pre-history up to classical Rome;⁴⁴ the second wing women from Christianity up to the Reformation⁴⁵ and the third wing, women from the American revolution to the feminist revolution.⁴⁶ Each place setting consists of an embroidered runner, a gold chalice and utensils, and a china-painted

⁴⁰ Mukti Barton, *Rejection, Resistance and Resurrection: Speaking out on racism in the church* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005).

⁴¹ Keller, *From a Broken Web*: 223.

⁴² Now in the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, on permanent display.

⁴³ See Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of our Heritage* (Anchor, 1979); Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation* (Merrell, 2007); Amelia Jones, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (University of California Press, 1996); Jane F. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (University of Georgia Press, 2013).

⁴⁴ Primordial Goddess, Fertile Goddess, Ishtar, Kali, Snake Goddess, Sophia, Amazon, Hatshepsut, Judith, Sappho, Aspasia, Boadicea, Hypatia.

⁴⁵ Marcella, Saint Bridget, Theodora, Hrosvitha, Trotula, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Hildegard of Bingen, Petronilla de Meath, Christine de Pisan, Isabella d'Este, Elizabeth R, Artemissia Gentileschi, Anna van Schurman.

⁴⁶ Anne Hutchinson, Sacajawea, Caroline Herschel, Mary Wollstonecraft, Sojourner Truth, Susan B Anthony, Elizabeth Blackwell, Emily Dickinson, Ethel Smyth, Margaret Sanger, Natalie Barney, Virginia Woolf, Georgia O'Keefe.

porcelain raised plate. The whole installation sits on a mosaic floor of tiles, 'the heritage floor', consisting of two thousand, three hundred handcast porcelain tiles commemorating nine hundred and ninety-nine mythological and historical women of achievement.

The Dinner Party is a huge achievement in its own right (although it was savaged by critics of the time for its 'vapid prettiness', 'explicit sexual references', 'titillation', 'crass' and 'solemn vulgarity').⁴⁷ I suggest it can also serve to highlight many features of feminist practical theology: its collaborative, collective nature; its critique and dismantling of patriarchal tradition and ways of working; its forging of an alternative tradition of repressed and neglected female lives; its recovery and retrieval of a feminine symbolic imaginary rooted in the female body and ancient archetypes of the goddess; its artistry, painstaking labour and skill, its attention to detail as well as its vision and daring.

Yet *The Dinner Party* is also notable for what is missing, and this absence may shine a light on what feminist practical theology can bring to the table. For all its materiality, Chicago's dinner party has an oddly stylised and disembodied quality to it. We may watch at this table, we may approach within inches, yet we may not handle or touch. This is not a table such as we might sit around to have a real dinner party. Its plates are sculptures to be admired rather than crockery to be used (and many of them took repeated firings to achieve Chicago's technically difficult design); and would we dare to set down a goblet, even spill a few drops of wine, on those exquisite runners? In its dark, hushed space, it is a museum piece, testifying to lives that are remembered, but absent. Above all, there are no living, breathing bodies at this table – except for those of visitors who view and observe, at a slight distance.

This absence is, of course, intentional. The women Chicago envisages at this dinner table can never meet in actuality; we, the viewers, have to bring our own work of imagination to realise the vision in our mind's eye. Their absence also points up women's absence in almost all depictions of the Last Supper and protests against women's exclusion from patriarchal ritual and religion.⁴⁸ Furthermore, Chicago's dinner guests, for all their relegation to the margins of history, remain the singular heroines of the past. They are exceptional achievers, whose lives or work broke new ground for women (even if their achievements were not recognised in their own time). Behind each of these women stand an invisible multitude of unnamed women and girls, who are even further removed from access to the table. Chicago's *Dinner Party* both is and is not a dinner party such as the gospels envisage for the outsiders, the poor, the lepers, the prostitutes and tax-collectors. Insofar as she has widened access to the table, her

⁴⁷ See, for example, Hilton Kramer, 'Art: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party Comes to Brooklyn Museum', *New York Times* October 17, 1980, and Maureen Mullarkey, 'The Dinner Party is a Church Supper: Judy Chicago at the Brooklyn Museum', at <http://www.maureenmullarkey.com/essays/dinnerparty.html>. Accessed 1.ix.17.

⁴⁸ On the question of women's presence at the Last Supper, see the brief discussion in my *Seeking the Risen Christa*: 42-3, and Dorothy A. Lee, 'Women disciples at the last supper' in Judi Fisher and Janet Woods (eds.), *A Place at the Table: Women at the Last Supper* (Melbourne Joint Board of Education, 1993).

vision marks only the beginning of the work of inclusion with which feminist practical theology is concerned.

It is precisely the living, breathing bodies of 'ordinary' women and girls (who are, of course, very far from ordinary) that feminist practical theology brings to the table, insisting on their right to be at the dinner party and lifting up the particular gifts they bring – gifts which have been disregarded, counted as no more than crumbs under the table. Practical theology looks to the lives and experience of ordinary seekers and believers, rather than to professional theologians, formally trained clerics or exceptional holy ones, as the main source and norm of theological enquiry. Far from being the application of an already worked out doctrinal theology, practical theology insists that the practice *is* the theology and the theology is the practice. Maria Harris, a much-loved teacher and mentor, suggests five primary practices, drawn from the account of the early church in Acts, which characterize the life of the church.⁴⁹ She names them forms of curricula through which the church learns to be the church: the curricula of community, prayer, teaching, proclamation and service, respectively. Practical theologians in recent times have offered their own accounts of the classic or historic forms of religious practice which are regarded as normative for Christians (prayer and Bible reading, hospitality, tithing, fasting, the keeping of Sabbath, and so on) as well as probing contemporary practices which shape individuals' lives and the corporate expression of faith in new, and sometimes challenging, ways (for example, watching TV and film, the use of social media, changing habits of eating, shopping and other forms of consumption).⁵⁰ Both kinds of practice – historical and contemporary – are primary forms of faith, in at least a twofold sense: first, in the sense that practice *forms* thinking, belief and doctrine and, second, in the sense that practice has its own complex, intricate *forms* which are as worthy of scholarly attention as the complex systems of thought of great theologians.

Thus, much contemporary scholarship in practical theology focuses on the study of lived religion,⁵¹ especially the faith lives of ordinary believers. James Fowler's research into adult faith development,⁵² though rather out of favour now, laid theological foundations for this kind of approach in the United States, whilst Elaine Graham's insistence on the primacy of 'transforming practice'⁵³ helped to set a direction for British practical theology beyond the remit of pastoral care to

⁴⁹ Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People: Curriculum in the Church* (Westminster/ John Knox, 1989).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Dorothy C. Bass (ed.), *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (Jossey-Bass, 1997); Miroslav Volf and Dorothy C. Bass (eds.), *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Eerdmans, 2002); Dorothy C. Bass et al, *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters* (Wm B Eerdmans, 2016).

⁵¹ See Nancy T. Ammerman (ed.), *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press, 2008); R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Johan H. Roeland, 'Lived religion: The praxis of practical theology', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 18.1 (2014):91-101; R. Ruard Ganzevoort and Srdjan Sremac (eds.), *Lived Religion and the Politics of (In)Tolerance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

⁵² James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (Harper & Row, 1981).

⁵³ Elaine Graham, *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (Mowbray, 1996).

a wider set of contexts and discourses that shape living (contexts including the city and the public square, to which Graham has made significant contributions).⁵⁴ Stephen Pattison's wide-ranging interests in the relation between belief and practice in contexts as diverse as health care and chaplaincy, and around notions of shame, face and visual art,⁵⁵ demonstrate the breadth and richness of such approaches. Heather Walton's range of concerns around materiality, aesthetics, gender and different forms of literature and creative writing remind us that 'lived religion' includes cultural practices such as reading, writing, making and viewing art.⁵⁶ Empirical work such as Jeff Astley's study of 'ordinary theology',⁵⁷ Linda Woodhead's sociological studies of spirituality within and beyond the churches,⁵⁸ and a variety of action research projects conducted by Helen Cameron and her colleagues,⁵⁹ have all been significant in fleshing out an approach committed to the study of faith as it is actually lived in people's everyday lives. Here at VU, the Amsterdam Center for the Study of Lived Religion⁶⁰ draws together an impressive range of research and scholarship examining the changing face of religious practice within a contemporary intermingling of cultures and communities. I am excited to be joining this lively research culture.

Where practical theology shines a light on ordinary believers' faith lives, *feminist* practical theology focuses specifically on the neglected voices, experiences and practices of women and girls, critiquing, subverting and expanding androcentric accounts of religion – and, at the same time, helping to sensitise awareness to other neglected voices. For, as Teresa Berger puts it, 'women's real presence continues to be veiled'⁶¹ in the life of the churches, despite the fact that women form the majority in most congregations (the Eucharistic reference is, of course, intentional). Feminist practical theologians such as Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Zoë Bennett in the UK, Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Carol Lakey Hess in the U.S., as well as European colleagues such as Riet Bons-Storm, have all contributed to a growing attention to gender within practical theology.⁶² Focused empirical research into the patterns of women's

⁵⁴ Elaine Graham and Stephen R. Lowe, *What Makes a Good City? Public Theology and the Urban Church* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2009); Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (SCM, 2013).

⁵⁵ Stephen Pattison, *Pastoral Care and Liberation Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); *Seeing Things: Deepening Relations with Visual Artefacts* (SCM, 2007).

⁵⁶ Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women, Writing and God* (T&T Clark, 2007); *Literature, Theology and Feminism* (Manchester University Press, 2007); *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection* (SCM, 2014); *Not Eden: Spiritual Life Writing for This World* (SCM, 2015).

⁵⁷ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Ashgate, 2002).

⁵⁸ For example, Paul Heelas, Linda Woodhead et al, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Blackwell, 2005).

⁵⁹ For example, Helen Cameron, Philip Richter, Douglas Davies and Frances Ward (eds.), *Studying Local Churches: A Handbook* (SCM, 2005); Helen Cameron et al, *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (SCM, 2010); Clare Watkins and Helen Cameron, *Disclosing Church: Ecclesiology in Four Voices* (Routledge, forthcoming).

⁶⁰ <https://www.godgeleerdheid.vu.nl/en/research/institutes-and-centres/amsterdam-centre-for-the-study-of-lived-religion/index.aspx>

⁶¹ Berger, *Fragments of Real Presence*: 3.

⁶² Key texts include Elaine Graham and Margaret Halsey (eds.), *Life Cycles: Women and Pastoral Care* (SPCK, 1993); Riet Bons-Storm, *The Incredible Woman: Listening to Women's Silences in*

and girl's faith lives has been slower to emerge, despite nearly five decades of feminist theology. This has been a particular focus of my own work, shared by colleagues Fran Porter and Anne Phillips, and by a growing number of researchers within the Symposium on the Faith Lives of Women and Girls. Thus my doctoral study of women's faith narratives sought to critique and expand existing accounts of faith development, particularly that of James Fowler.⁶³ At around the same time (though we did not know each other then), Fran Porter was conducting doctoral research on women's faith lives in the troubled context of Northern Ireland, highlighting the socially-engaged qualities of their faith.⁶⁴ Ellen Clark King's doctoral study, published in the same year, explored the religious experiences and theologies of working class women in a Northern British town, bringing them into creative dialogue with perspectives from feminist theology.⁶⁵ A little later, Anne Phillips' doctoral study into the faith lives of girls in a Baptist church context offers a rare example of serious study of childhood female faith.⁶⁶ Others have expanded the range of research, focusing on young adult female faith,⁶⁷ as well as the neglected lives of elderly women (mainstays of congregations yet rarely accorded serious theological reflection),⁶⁸ or considering the significance of women's practices of ritual,⁶⁹ reading,⁷⁰ silence⁷¹ and of dieting⁷² in the shaping of faith. New European research highlights the experience of women in migrant churches⁷³ and women who may

Pastoral Care and Counseling (Abingdon, 1996); Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (ed.), *Through the Eyes of Women: Insights for Pastoral Care* (Fortress, 1996); Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers Of Our Common House: Women's Development in Communities of Faith* (Abingdon, 1997); Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Brita L. Gill-Austern (eds.), *Feminist and Womanist Pastoral Theology* (Abingdon, 1999); Jeanne Stevenson Moessner (ed.), *In Her Own Time: Women and Developmental Issues in Pastoral Care* (Fortress, 2000); Zoë Bennett Moore, *Introducing Feminist Perspectives on Pastoral Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

⁶³ Nicola Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Ashgate, 2004).

⁶⁴ Published as Fran Porter, *It Will Not Be Taken Away From Her: A Feminist Engagement with Women's Christian Experience* (Darton, Longman & Todd, 2004). An earlier, more substantial account of the research was published as Fran Porter, *Changing Women, Changing Worlds: Evangelical Women in Church, Community and Politics* (Blackstaff Press, 2002).

⁶⁵ Ellen Clark King, *Theology By Heart: Women, the Church and God* (Epworth, 2004).

⁶⁶ Anne Phillips, *The Faith of Girls: Children's Spirituality and Transition to Adulthood* (Ashgate, 2011).

⁶⁷ For example, Kim Wasey, 'Being in Communion: Patterns of Inclusion and Exclusion in Young Lay Women's Experiences of Eucharist in the Church of England', in *Faith Lives of Women and Girls*: 65-76; Ruth Perrin, 'Searching for Sisters: The Influence of Biblical Role Models on Young Women from Mainstream and Charismatic Evangelical Traditions', in *Faith Lives of Women and Girls*: 111-9.

⁶⁸ For example, Abby Day, *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen: The Last Active Anglican Generation* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶⁹ Jan Berry, *Ritual Making Women: Shaping Rites for Changing Lives* (Equinox, 2009).

⁷⁰ Dawn Llewellyn, *Reading, Feminism, and Spirituality: Troubling the Waves* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁷¹ Alison Woolley, 'Silent Gifts: An Exploration of Relationality in Contemporary Christian Women's Chosen Practices of Silence', in *Faith Lives of Women and Girls*: 147-59.

⁷² Hannah Bacon, *Go Forth and Shrink! Towards a Feminist Theology of Dieting* (T&T Clark, forthcoming).

⁷³ For example, Alma Lanser, 'Music as Bridge: Young Women in the Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands', *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 18 (2010):193-200. See also Mechteld Jansen and Hijme Stoffels (eds.), *A Moving God: Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands* (Lit Verlag, 2008).

be described as 'flexible believers'.⁷⁴ Such studies illuminate the wide range of practices, both classic and contemporary, through which female faith is enacted, and demonstrate the shifting and complex relations between gender and faith, on the one hand and between practice and belief on the other. Moreover, changing patterns of female faith require new interpretative paradigms: a shift from what Manuela Kalsky describes as an 'either/or' to a relational, 'as well as' approach within a rhizomatic network of being.⁷⁵ We are back to the web!

I wish I had time to name and honour the whole range of research being conducted by women who belong to the Symposium, and beyond it to the richness of our research culture at Queen's, represented by student and staff colleagues here today with their varying research projects and interests. Whether in systematics, biblical or historical studies or my own field of practical theology, each of us has our own particular focus, lens and context, out of which we generate new questions, hypotheses and tentative readings. Such studies may be small in scale, highly context-specific and appropriately modest in their claims, yet together represent more than the sum of their parts. Together, such micro-analyses offer more and more adequate understandings of the richness of lived faith as it is practised by diverse groups and individuals in different contexts and situations, including the past. No one account can offer more than a glimpse of the bigger picture, yet together, they build up a network of knowledge which both creates and reflects the web that connects us all and holds our diverse perspectives in relation.

My own practice as a feminist practical theologian

In the development of my own specific commitments to feminist practical theology – a development that was certainly never planned and that has proceeded piecemeal, in fragmentary fashion and with a good deal of stops and starts – I can look back and discern a number of enduring concerns and characteristics. One has been a commitment to the close scrutiny of the actuality of women's faith lives: to the ways in which women pray, preach, preside, protest and prophecy, form communities of care, create new forms of liturgy, make new theologies. This has been expressed both through a commitment to qualitative research and through an engagement in poetry as a primary means of theological analysis, critique and envisioning.⁷⁶

It may not seem as if qualitative research and poetry have much in common with each other, but I believe they both spring from a similar passion to attend to the

⁷⁴ See Manuela Kalsky, 'Flexible Believers in the Netherlands: A Paradigm Shift toward Transreligious Multiplicity', *Open Theology* 3 (2017):345-59; also Daan F. Oostveen, 'Multiple Religious Belonging: Hermeneutical Challenges for Theology of Religions', *Open Theology* 3 (2017):38-47.

⁷⁵ Kalsky, 'Flexible Believers': 345.

⁷⁶ See my chapter, '(W)riting Like a Woman: In Search of a Feminist Theological Poetics', in Gavin D'Costa, Eleanor Nesbitt, Mark Pryce, Ruth Shelton and Nicola Slee *Making Nothing Happen: Five Poets Explore Faith and Spirituality* (Ashgate, 2014): 9-47; and 'Poetry as Feminist Research Methodology in the Study of Female Faith', in *Researching Female Faith*: 37-53.

particularity, 'thickness' and irreducible texture of human experience, and to seek for traces of the divine within the human ordinary. The poet and ethnographer notice and observe human lives and experiences which others might consider random, odd or of little significance. They seek to capture the life in time, as a painter seeks to capture a particular scene that will not come again. As soon as it is set down, it is gone; yet by being made into something – a poem, a research paper, a lecture – it is lifted up for attention, and has the capacity to contribute to conversation and understanding, to change perceptions and habits, and thus to become part of a larger poesis.

Decades ago, Simone Weil argued that attention is at the core both of any serious study and of the life of prayer,⁷⁷ and thus she considered that academic study, pursued with diligence and concentration, was a preparation for prayer if not, itself, a means a prayer. Poetry and qualitative research have been two of the ways in which I have learnt to practice whatever skills of attention I have managed to muster. They have been, and are, primary forms of prayer, although it has taken me a while to recognize this.

Another core commitment within my own work has been the creation, very often with others, of feminist liturgy. We might think of liturgy as the place where the lived experience of seekers and believers and the normative theologies of the church come together with prayer and poetry (or could do). If the corporate, public liturgy of the church is one of the main practices that form and shape the theology and social practice of individual believers, it is a crucial testing ground for what I've been talking about in this lecture. Not only in the words of liturgy (crucial though they are), but in the visual, spatial, aural and material discourses that find expression in buildings, arrangements of bodies and space, music and visual art and symbolism, androcentrism has been the norm. For at least four decades, feminists have been subjecting the liturgical texts and practices of the churches to critical deconstruction, demonstrating the ways in which liturgy has legitimized and reinforced patriarchal patterns of dominance and creating new forms of praying, presiding, preaching and performing liturgy.⁷⁸ For all this creative activity, mainstream denominations in the UK, at least, remain largely resistant to feminist reform. In recent liturgical reforms (of which there have been many), despite a plethora of new texts on offer, at most it is possible to detect a tokenistic nod in the direction of feminist prayer, for example, in occasional (and contested) use of feminine imagery for God.⁷⁹ Ruether's cry in

⁷⁷ Simone Weil, 'Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a view to the Love of God', at <http://www.hagiasophiaclassical.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Right-Use-of-School-Studies-Simone-Weil.pdf>. Accessed 1.ix.17.

⁷⁸ For example, Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice* (Harper & Row, 1985); Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite*; Teresa Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship: Gender Analysis and Liturgical History* (Liturgical Press, 1999); Janet H. Wootton, *Introducing a Practical Feminist Theology of Worship* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); Sylvia Rothschild and Sybil Sheridan (eds.), *Taking Up the Timbrel: The Challenge of Creating Ritual for Jewish Women Today* (SCM, 2000); Teresa Berger (ed.) *Dissident Daughters: Feminist Liturgies in Global Context* (Westminster/John Knox, 2001); Anne Elvey, Carol Hogan, Kim Power and Claire Renkin (eds.), *Reinterpreting the Eucharist: Explorations in Feminist Theology and Ethics* (Equinox, 2013).

⁷⁹ The 1999 Methodist Worship Book has one reference to 'God our Father and our Mother' in a communion service (Methodist Publishing House, 1999: 204), while *Common Worship: Services*

1985 that 'women in contemporary churches are suffering from linguistic deprivation and eucharistic famine'⁸⁰ is echoed by many today. The experimental liturgies she offered in that text – rites for critical events in women's lives largely ignored by the churches, such as rape and incest, coming out as a lesbian, the onset of menstruation and its cessation in menopause – appear as fresh and startling some thirty years later, precisely because they are still so rare. Yet where such liturgies are created and celebrated, often in small, unofficial settings, they have the capacity to repair the ravages of the broken web.

Conclusion: a celebration of tables

Talk about liturgy and Eucharist brings me back to the image of the table. There are many tables and, as my wise spiritual companion Donald Eadie opines, many hidden altars.⁸¹ There are the tables around which students and colleagues share food and conversation, lives touching lives, both here at VU and at Queen's, where much of our theology is done – as well as the more formal tables of classrooms where we listen, learn and debate. There are tables at home and in cafes and restaurants where friends and family gather to tell stories, dissect the news, try to make sense of events happening around us both near and far. There are refractory tables in hidden monasteries, where monks and nuns eat in companionable silence, and solitary tables where scholars and poets sit, at the midnight hour or in the cold before dawn, reading and writing. There are eucharistic tables in cathedrals, churches and chapels where prayer is offered day after day, and soulfood may be found. There are the small, fragile yet resilient gatherings of women, queer folks and others who have not experienced nourishment at the church's tables, making their own ritual. There are tables at which there is never enough, tables which have been swept away by mudslides or floods, tables where those who do not meet the dress code are barred. There are tables in boardrooms, governments and councils where business is done, goods and land and monies exchanged, and decisions that shape all of our lives are made. All of these tables form the substance and practice with which theology has to do, even if theologians may struggle to connect them.

On our first visit to VU, David Hewlett and I sat down over coffee and buns with Professor Wim Janse, then Dean of the Faculty, and Professor Dirk-Martin Grube; as the conversation developed, we recognised our common values and the potential for fruitful collaboration. I wish to express my gratitude to David, Wim and Dirk-Martin, and also to Ruard (who later took Wim's place at the table), who have guided me in the process that has brought me to this day, with great skill and kindness. I also thank the Faculty Board, and Governors at Queen's, for endorsing my appointment. Every one of my colleagues at Queen's, as well as the

and Prayers for the Church of England similarly has one Eucharistic prayer (G) containing the phrase 'As a mother tenderly gathers her children' (Church House Publishing, 2000: 201). Even more experimental and avowedly inclusive groups, such as the Greenbelt Christian Arts Festival, have been slow to embrace feminist liturgy, though I am glad to note the presence of the Red Tent at Greenbelt 2017, a dedicated space for feminist prayer, exploration and conversation.

⁸⁰ Ruether, *Women-Church:4*.

⁸¹ Donald Eadie, in personal conversation.

whole student community, have supported me generously in the opportunity afforded by this chair. I wish to thank in particular Fran Porter, Rachel Starr and Dave Allen for their collegueship, upon which I depend more than they may realise, as well as my top floor colleagues, Eunice Atwood, Ashley Cocksworth, Gary Hall and Simon Sutcliffe. I owe much to a number of former colleagues: Helen Dixon Cameron, with whom I wove both a job-share in my early time at Queen's, an Advent weaving liturgy and a feminist reflection on the parable of the Prodigal;⁸² Anthony Reddie, whose work in Black practical theology shares analogous commitments to my own;⁸³ Mukti Barton, whose commitment to gender and racial justice has been uncompromising, and whose friendship has been both searching and enriching;⁸⁴ Paula Gooder, a sister Anglican laywoman whose commitment to making the church a place where women can flourish is remarkable⁸⁵; and, above all, Stephen Burns, a fine liturgical scholar and feminist man who has championed my work over a number of decades and with whom I have been blessed to collaborate on several projects.⁸⁶ With poet theologian friends Gavin D'Costa, Ruth Shelton, Eleanor Nesbitt and Mark Pryce,⁸⁷ I enjoy some of the most nourishing fare for body and soul that keeps poesis alive.

There have been many mentors, teachers and guides in my life. I have mentioned several in passing, but wish to raise a toast here to my doctoral supervisor, Professor John Hull, whose work and life have had a profound impact, not only upon my own personal and professional development, but upon the whole community at Queen's. I like to think that John would be pleased that one of his former students is now stepping into the professorial shoes vacated by his death.

Friends are the mainstay of our lives, and I am grateful for many, too numerous to mention. I will single out two, Jo Jones and Alison Woolley, who have offered particular support and encouragement while I have been working on this lecture,

⁸² See 'Laying of the cloth: an Advent prayer', 'Weaving of the cloth: an Advent canticle' and 'Blessing at the table' in *Praying Like a Woman*: 56, 105, 106. See also Nicola Slee and Helen Cameron, 'Peering into the Shadows or Foregrounding the Feminine: Feminist Rewritings of the Parable of the Prodigal Son', *Practical Theology* 7.1 (2014): 50-62.

⁸³ Anthony G. Reddie, *Faith, Stories and the Experience of Black Elders: Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land* (Jessica Kingsley, 2001); *Nobodies to Somebodies: A Practical Theology for Education and Liberation* (Epworth, 2003); *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God-Talk* (Equinox, 2006).

⁸⁴ Mukti Barton, *Scripture as Empowerment for Liberation and Justice: The Experience of Christian and Muslim Women in Bangladesh* (University of Bristol, 1999); *Rejection, Resistance, and Resurrection*.

⁸⁵ Paula worked tirelessly during a long tenure on the Church of England's General Synod, as well as in her numerous publications and speaking engagements, towards a more inclusive church. Amongst her many publications, see *The Meaning is in the Waiting: The Spirit of Advent* (Canterbury Press, 2008); *This Risen Existence: The Spirit of Easter* (Canterbury Press, 2009); *Heaven* (SPCK, 2011); *Body: Biblical Spirituality for the Whole Person* (SPCK, 2016).

⁸⁶ Stephen Burns, Nicola Slee and Michael N. Jagessar (eds.), *The Edge of God: New Liturgical Texts and Contexts in Conversation* (Epworth, 2008); Nicola Slee and Stephen Burns (eds.), *Presiding Like a Woman*. Stephen's prodigious output in liturgical studies and practical theology is a source of constant learning and sustenance, in texts such as *Worship in Context: Liturgical Theology, Children and the City* (Epworth, 2006); *Liturgy: SCM Studyguide* (SCM, 2006); *Christian Worship in Australia: Inculturating the Liturgical Tradition* (edited with Anita Munro, St Paul's, 2009); *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (with Michael N. Jagessar, Equinox, 2011)

⁸⁷ See D'Costa et al, *Making Nothing Happen*.

and somehow always found the right thing to say. My partner, Rosie Miles, sees me at my worst and best and never stops believing in me. I am deeply thankful that she continues to keep faith with me in fractured times.

I end this lecture with a poem, not in the hope of gathering all the loose threads into one cohesive whole, but as a way of concretising my vision of what theology can do. A poem is, of course, no more than a fragment in time, a scattering of words on a page; yet a poem can sometimes become a sign of hope, a glimpse of wholeness, 'an act of defiance against the ever-present forces of fragmentariness in our lives.'⁸⁸ This poem speaks of 'the table of Christa', the unrecognized feminine divine who is always and everywhere in our midst seeking to break open the bread of life, strengthening those who eat it to carry on the work of making and breaking, rending and mending, in which we all share.

At the table of Christa⁸⁹

The women do not serve
but are served

The children are not silent
but chatter

The menfolk do not dominate
but co-operate

The animals are not shussed away
but are welcomed

At the table of Christa

There is no seat of honour
for all are honoured

There is no etiquette
except the performance of grace

There is no dress code
except the garments of honesty

There is no fine cuisine
other than the bread of justice

At the table of Christa

There is no talk of betrayal
but only of healing and hopefulness

⁸⁸ Teresa Berger, *Fragments of Real Presence*: 15.

⁸⁹ First published in *Presiding Like a Woman*: 178.

No money changes hands
but all know themselves rich in receiving

Death is in no-one's mind
but only the lust for life

No-one needs to command 'Remember'
for no-one present can ever forget