

ANTHROPOLOGY

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF12-23Harrington>

FEMINISM AGAINST PROGRESS by Mary Harrington. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2023. 249 pages. Hardcover; \$29.99. ISBN: 9781684514878.

In many ways, this book is an autobiography of Mary Harrington losing faith. Not losing faith in God. It is not at all clear that she has any faith in God or a higher being. This is a book about her loss of faith in a post-modern worldview with ideas of progress that go along with that worldview. She suggests that this worldview is, in fact, a “quasi-theological regime” (p. 12), and one with powerful economic, social, and media support. In Christian terms, we could call it the “god of this age,” a god with many false promises and claims.

At the heart of this worldview is the idea that “progress” entails “a structure of belief” in which “there exists a kind of axis along which progress can be measured, and that we’re inexorably moving along that axis from ‘more bad’ to ‘less bad,’” and furthermore, “this movement is unstoppable” (p. 12). Harrington writes that her starting premise for this book “is that this structure is a belief, not a fact” and that she is not “a believer in Progress Theology” (p. 13). The book is her attempt to demonstrate why this is the case, why she lost her faith.

The aspect of progress she is most interested in is purported progress with respect to gender, especially where that concerns women. Harrington still considers herself a feminist in the sense that she cares about women’s interests. But she has rejected what she formerly took for granted: “that men and women are substantially the same,” and that both sexes have the equal right “to self-realisation [sic], shorn of culturally imposed obligations, expectations, stereotypes or constraints” (p. 14).

Her transformation to “reactionary feminist” took hold when she became a mother. She realized that feminist ideals like radical autonomy and personal fulfillment are not the greatest goods. Mothering, she discovered, was a great good that entailed giving up one’s autonomy and finding fulfillment in nurturing another.

The book lays out a comprehensive set of propositions for rethinking what it is to be man and woman

in today’s complicated world. She traces the various contours of the sexual revolution which has roots in the feminism of the early twentieth century. She is critical of the advent of the birth control pill for its effects on women’s bodies, mental health, relationships, and the environment, citing various studies to support her critique. The pill, she suggests, is one of the first technological steps toward the feminist ideal of ridding society of sexed differences and increasing female autonomy. But this has not turned out as positive as feminists would have us believe. She asserts that “half a century of concerted feminist effort to stamp out sexed differences as baseless ‘stereotypes,’ in the name of furthering that freedom [from relationships], has succeeded only in shaping what’s for sale” (p. 98). Furthermore, although women have the autonomy they desired with respect to their bodies, this has not led to the utopia they envisioned (pp. 99–100).

One of the most interesting chapters is entitled “Meat Lego Gnosticism.” The premise of this “cyborg theology,” writes Harrington, is “that inner identity is unrelated to physiological form” (p. 142). For cyborg theology, body parts are just that: exchangeable bits of meat that you can dispose of or take on at will—meat Lego pieces. Any wholistic notion of human persons is completely absent from this campaign, a campaign she claims was spawned by technology (pp. 138–39), encouraged by markets, embedded in elite class politics (pp. 150–51), and supported through a variety of sources.

In opposition to all of this, Harrington introduces readers to “reactionary feminism,” a feminism that she claims is good not just for women, but also for men. She specifically argues for three things. First, she argues for traditional, life-long marriage as a common, and therefore a foundational and stabilizing, factor for society (pp. 178–81). Specifically, she suggests that marriage is less for “personal fulfillment, or even romantic love, than an enabling condition for building a meaningful life” (p. 182), and that it includes “cooperation on the domestic economy, and the intimate work of creating a safe and stable space for children” (p. 185).

Second, based on her research, she argues for men-only and women-only spaces because men and women are different by nature and therefore have different social needs. For Harrington, these sorts of

spaces allow men to interact with other men as men, and women to interact with other women as women, while also allowing young men to learn from older men and young women to learn from older women. Interestingly, both of these first two claims are supported by historic Christian teaching as well.

Finally, she advocates against hormonal birth control, not only because the physiological effects on women are often unhealthy, but also because of the effect of estradiol on the environment (p. 208). Once again, Christian teaching about stewardship both of one's body and the creation as a whole dovetail with her ideas here.

Harrington's book is comprehensive, weaving together aspects of marketing, technology, and sociology to provide a revised story of what it is to be male and female. Her research includes everything from personal interviews to Twitter feeds to peer-reviewed journals and studies, the details of which are included in her extensive endnotes. Although she writes in the context of the United Kingdom, she does, at times, refer to work done in the United States, noting the politicized nature of her ideas in that context.

The comprehensive nature of the book along with the lack of a clear thesis, is at times confusing. She is clearly critical of progressive feminism and the prevailing gender ideology that she associates with it, criticism that is lately being leveled by other women who were sold a story by gender studies gurus.¹ Her association of this story with the free-market system and the technology giants embedded in that system is interesting. But it seems, at times, as if she were trying to write two books: one defending male and female as ineluctable categories of nature, and one blaming tech-dominated markets for their profit-based interests in promoting the alternate paradigm of denying sexed differences. Trying to do both muddied the waters in ways that were not always helpful and sometimes confusing.²

Scientific specialists in the area of sex and gender may be more critical than I of the studies she cites. From my nonspecialist perspective, I appreciated that she not only took account of scientific studies from peer-reviewed journals, but also included personal reflections from her own experience, as well as that of others, and included opinions and experiences she

learned of through various social media outlets. In general, these are not stories we are told.

As a Christian theologian, I found her insights both surprising and interesting. Surprising because they comport remarkably well with a Christian worldview despite the fact that she is not a Christian. It was also interesting because the new Gnosticism she describes is diametrically opposed to the historic Christian affirmation of the goodness of the material world, including our material bodies. She unknowingly affirms both the biblical teaching that humans are created male and female, and the biblical understanding that humans flourish when they live within the boundaries set by our Creator.

Although her language is at times crass, and some of the examples she offers may be offensive, this book is pro-women as women—including our bodies—and as such, is also pro-men. I would recommend this book to a wide variety of people, including social scientists, technology experts, and theologians. For Christians who feel marginalized by current cultural pressures toward a nonsexed society, pressures that are even supported by many churches, this book will ring true with respect to the historic teachings of the church on sex and gender. It will also encourage them that their basic instincts about sex and gender are, in fact, in line with God's created intentions for humans.

Notes

¹For a Christian perspective on this, see, for example, Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2022).

²For a helpful look at the problem of big tech companies and their undue influence via social media on young people, a problem that is especially pronounced in young women as Harrington writes, see the Center for Humane Technology's various resources on this topic, including the 2020 film, "The Social Dilemma," <https://www.humanetech.com/>.

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BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.56315/PSCF12-23Massmann>

MODIFYING OUR GENES: Theology, Science and "Playing God" by Alexander Massmann and Keith R. Fox. London, UK: SCM Press, 2021. vii + 151 pages. Paperback; \$21.49. ISBN: 9780334059530.