

The Leader's Way Podcast
Episode 18: Feminist Theology with Karen O'Donnell

Karen O'Donnell: One of the things I love about feminist theology is there isn't one thing. There are as many feminist theologies as there are people doing feminist theology, and I really love the messiness of that. But also, I think partly because patriarchy across theology and across our scriptures is so dominant and so woven all the way through it, that actually feminist theology is the thing that recognizes patriarchy in all those places and acts to challenge it; acts to reveal it, even. Sometimes revealing it is all that the feminist theologian can do, but that in itself is a good thing.

Brandon: Hi, I'm Brandon Nappi.

Hannah: Hi, I'm Hannah Black.

B: We're your hosts on The Leader's Way, an audio pilgrimage from Berkeley Divinity School, the Episcopal Seminary at Yale University. On this journey, we reflect on what matters most in life as we talk about all things spirituality, innovation, leadership, and transformation.

H: So Brandon, we are back in Connecticut from Texas.

B: We are, and it's true, everything is bigger in Texas. So we were in a hotel, a conference center right on this mall, which was maybe as big as 10 malls that I've ever been in.

H: Well, first of all, how were there two of the same hotel within one mall? Wow. And also, it made it feel like it was a city unto itself. Like you could eat there, you could sleep there, you could shop there. It didn't have a church inside the mall.

B: Well, I guess we were providing the church, weren't we?

H: That's true. There was worship every morning.

B: So we had this amazing time, so many beautiful, wonderful leaders from all around the country, within the Episcopal Church just coming together and having a little bit of a family reunion, I think is how I would first name it. We were doing some thinking and some reflecting, but it was a little bit like a love fest. It was a little bit like a love fest.

H: So we were there for Episcopal Parish Network Conference, EPN, and I think that was the first time I was in one place with 800 Episcopalians. And so you start to get to know the subculture a little bit better. And I think, just spot on what I would have expected, which was a lot of hope, a lot of love, a lot of wanting to do great things for the kingdom of heaven and seek justice and a lot of good.

B: Yeah, I mean, I've been to a lot of conferences in my life and just shout out to the planners of

EPN. I just feel like this was one of the more human kinds of conferences.

H: That's it.

B: There wasn't a lot of armor up and posturing, and "Let me tell you about how brilliant and wonderful and smart I am." It was just a lot of friendship, which is like even post-pandemic, which I still feel like in some ways we're in, I still need that. Like humans connecting with other humans in the same room.

H: And I mean, our listeners deserve to know that upon the recommendation of one of our board members, Brandon and I hopped on Ticketmaster, got tickets, and on a whim went to the Houston rodeo.

B: Let me just say that I do nothing spontaneously in my life. I am a planner.

H: Really?

B: I'm not advocating this approach, but it is. Like I can tell you what I'm doing three months on a Thursday afternoon. We very spontaneously went to the rodeo. And I'll be thinking about it for a very long time.

H: I consider myself well-traveled. I just lived internationally for a while. And it feels kind of rare to me that I go to something and think, "Wow, I have no idea what's about to happen next." This is so-- like it felt so foreign, but also so not foreign. I was like, OK, this has a little bit of county fare, a little bit of ... sports game, a little bit of going to a concert, a little bit like amusement park, food and wine festival, just all those things rolled into one.

B: Can I throw in another one? A little bit like horror movie.

H: What?

B: Because-- and just hear me out, I do so much suspense. Is that person going to die? fall off the bull and be trampled? I was anxious. I'm an anxious--

H: You were having some visceral reactions.

B: Visceral. I was like keeling over. Danger. I slow care about these--

H: That element of danger.

B: Danger, yeah. And so I needed a nap afterward. It was exhausting. Even though I did nothing but eat a funnel cake and watch, but I was exhausted.

H: Well, we should talk about what we ate, because we were excited about that. First of all,

there were so many things to choose from. And being a Californian, I thought, "I need Mexican food!" because that's just a thought I have, always. But we decided when in Rome ... when in Houston. And we went with the brisket sandwiches.

B: We did.

H: And then some funnel cake for Brandon. I went for the fried Oreos because Oreos remind me of being a teenager in church and having Oreos at small group Bible study. So that's sweet. But also they were way better than I ever would have thought.

B: Yeah, I'm going to call that Oreo experience-- and you were kind enough to let me have one-- I'm going to call them the eighth sacrament.

H: Whoa.

B: Yeah, they really exceeded my expectations.

H: I know. Well, because the thing is, I think what I was picturing was a crusty, fried situation. But it was more like a beignet with a surprise Oreo inside. The Oreo lost its structural integrity somewhere in the process in a really good way.

B: In a good way. I was also really touched-- I mean, there were hundreds of livestock and cows. And I just remember seeing these teenagers caring for their cows in a way that was just really sweet.

H: I will say many things melted my heart. The quilts melted my heart. The children's art melted my heart. And then ... I wouldn't consider it a heart melt. It was emotional, but I don't know what the emotion was: witnessing mutton busting for the first time.

B: Whew. We may need a whole mutton busting episode. There are so many questions. So many ethical quandaries. It was amazing. Yeah.

H: So for our listeners who are unfamiliar with the sport of mutton busting, these children who are about six years old grab onto the back of a sheep. And then, I don't know, they tell the sheep "Go!" And the sheep just starts booking it to the other side. The sheep is sprinting. And the child who's about six years old and wearing a helmet, their job is to hold on for as long as they can. And then they fall off. It's like surfing, I guess.

B: Right. And depending on the kid, this experience is the most incredible, life-giving ecstasy ever, or ...

H: Or they pull them up by their clothes ... with the camera zoomed into their face. And they look ... like they've just fallen off of sheep at high speed.

B: So we learned a lot. I'm really thankful for it. Still processing. It was clear that we were not from there.

H: Yeah.

B: We didn't have a cowboy hat. We didn't have cowboy boots.

H: No.

B: And finally, I think one of my most important takeaways is that we need more Connecticut-shaped food. When you go to Texas, you can get a variety of different foods all shaped like Texas.

H: In the shape of Texas.

B: Cookies, French toast, pancakes. I don't know that here in Connecticut, we make any food shaped like Connecticut. So that was a huge takeaway for me.

So we actually have a podcast episode, don't we?

H: For today, of course, not just going to be us talking about the rodeo today?

B: I mean, we could.

H: Indeed, indeed. Well, I have been really excited about this one. Today, we're talking with Karen O'Donnell, who's Academic Dean and Lecturer in Worship and Human Community at Westcott House in Cambridge—the United Kingdom, Cambridge. And Karen teaches introduction to Christian Worship, Patterns in Christian Worship. And she teaches the MPhil exercise in Religion and Gender at Cambridge. So her story is, after a career as a secondary school teacher, she undertook postgraduate study in theology. And her doctoral thesis focused on trauma and the Eucharist in relationship to bodies. And she was the leader of the MA program in Christian Spirituality at Sarum College before she came to Westcott. The reason I know Karen is because she recently launched an online community called the Feminist Theology Gathering, which is mainly a WhatsApp community. It's also— you can get on the email list. And I've been helping Karen with some of the programming. We have some really exciting talks coming up that people Zoom into.

It's a little bit of a shame, because I left Cambridge right as Karen was coming to Cambridge. And we have so many academic interests in common. So we've been sort of working on feminist theology together from afar. Her book is called *Broken Bodies: the Eucharist, Mary, and the Body in Trauma Theology*. She has another book that I believe is coming out this summer. So we'll look forward to that. It's super exciting and sparkly for me to have Karen here on the podcast to talk about feminist theology. And I'm hoping for our listeners who haven't had a lot of exposure to feminist theology that this is a fun window into it.

B: Yeah, I found this a really powerful conversation, especially just this core insight, which

maybe if you haven't done a lot of reading in feminist theology, you might not realize. But patriarchy hurts everyone, and feminist theology helps to liberate everyone. So there's a really expansive vision here for all of humanity. It's not just for women. It's not just focused on women's issues. Women's issues are human issues. They belong to all of us. So I love this sort of expansive place that she invites us to.

H: Welcome, Karen, to the Leaders Way podcast. I'm so excited that we finally get to record together. This is just wonderful.

K: Thank you for having me. It's really great to be here.

H: Yay.

B: There are so many Cambridge vibes going on right now. Does Cambridge have a mascot?

K: I don't know. I have no idea.

H: They don't really have mascots in the UK.

B: No? Okay.

H: Except for like ... Hogwarts has some mascots internal to Hogwarts.

K: It's a gesture of grace towards our American readers.

H: Thank you. Yeah. Just translating. I need things in animals.

B: The Cambridge love is abounding, so I'm just going to bask in your light.

H: Well, Westcott has a tortoise, right?

K: We do. We have Hort the tortoise, who's over 100 years old, named after one of the previous bishops. He now makes a very gentle appearance in the final weeks of the Easter term. And technically, the senior student is supposed to be responsible for Hort when Hort is here. No senior student wants Hort to die on their watch, so it becomes a very stressful couple of weeks. But he just roams the garden. They kind of give his shell a little bit of a wash. They give him some water. He likes to munch the grass. He's super cute. Yeah.

H: I think if I'm successful in life, whatever that means for me, someone might name a tortoise after me one day.

K: And you've really made it.

B: That's a really high bar.

K: Right.

B: Wow. Okay.

H: It seems less high than naming a person after you.

K: Also, like Hort's lived, you know, he's lived 100 years. I mean, that's longevity.

H: You've seen things. Right.

K: Seen ordinands come and go. Yeah.

H: World events. Sort of a passive dude for, you know, having seen so much.

K: Hibernates like 10 months of a year.

H: Totally. Maybe that's the secret, honestly.

So one of the reasons I wanted to ask you onto the podcast is because in a previous episode, I mean, I can't help myself. I just pepper in little feminist theology thoughts. Yeah. But I thought to myself, we really need to have a guest who can kind of give our listeners a little intro to what feminist theology is. I immediately thought of you because you've recently launched this online feminist theology network that's really exciting. And a lot of people have expressed interest in ... it's become a digital community. It's really wonderful. So with that interest and that in my mind makes you the Queen of Feminist Theology.

K: So I'm terrified and also very, very happy about that title. I will take it and also I fear it.

H: Yeah, that's fair. So as queen of feminist theology, might you be able to kind of give our listeners a little intro? What is feminist theology?

K: So I think sometimes people think feminist theology is just like women doing theology. Yeah. And like that's a good thing. Women should be doing theology, but that's not quite enough. And I think sometimes people think feminist theology is just like when we bring the feminine in alongside the masculine. And that's good. Like we should do that. But that also isn't necessarily kind of sufficient. It's kind of sometimes just serving to uphold like dominant gender paradigms that are already like very well-established in theology.

So I like Rosemary Radford-Ruether on this. If any of your listeners have not read Rosemary Radford-Ruether, you must. She is the queen of feminist theology.

H: True. Or was the queen. You could be the princess, I guess.

K: I take that. So Radford-Ruether says, if you'll forgive a quote, she says, "Feminism is a critical stance that challenges the patriarchal gender paradigm that associates males with

human characteristics defined as superior and dominant, like rationality and power, and females with those defined as inferior and auxiliary, such as intuition and passivity." I find that super helpful for then thinking about what feminist theology is. So I would usually talk about feminist theology as theology that is seeking to kind of question in a really wide range of quite creative ways the kind of patterns and modes of theology that really justify and perpetuate forms of male-dominant and female-subordination kind of paradigms. And really recognizing that patriarchy is bad for everybody, not just for women. Like patriarchy pushes men into roles in the same way it pushes women into roles, and none of those are helpful things.

So feminist theology for me is like theology that's trying to push at that. One of the things I love about feminist theology is like there isn't one thing. There are as many feminist theologies as there are people doing feminist theology, and I really love the kind of messiness of that. But also I think partly because patriarchy across theology and across our scriptures is so dominant and so kind of woven all the way through it that actually feminist theology is the kind of thing that recognizes patriarchy in all those places and acts to challenge it, acts to reveal it even. Sometimes revealing it is all that the feminist theologian can do, but that in itself is a good thing. Is that helpful?

B: Yeah, that's really helpful. Yeah, I am ... I'm thinking, can you transport us to your classroom? And what are those conversations like? You use the word messy, and I mean, learning is so messy. Life is messy. Growth is messy. Yeah. And what's it like to have a front row seat to students? I imagine some of them coming into contact with feminist theology for the first time. Yeah. You know, what are the surprises for you as a teacher? Where does your students typically get stuck? Where are the arguments and the wrestling? Take us into a class with you.

K: Yeah, so I actually taught a fantastic class this morning. Like I enjoyed it so much. I'm pretty sure the students enjoyed it. And I'll talk about that in just a moment. But I had a revelation this week where I discovered that one of my first-year students who already has a theology degree and he's now an ordinand studying a master's qualification. So he's coming from a very good university with a very good degree. And I'm teaching a class on liturgical theology in the Eucharist. And I set a piece of writing by Teresa Berger to read. Yale— Yay! And he was reading it in the library, and one of the other classmates came over and was like, "Oh, Teresa Berger is really cool. " And it turned out that's the first piece of feminist theology he'd ever read. And he has a first-class degree from one of the UK's leading institutions. I was like, how is that possible?

H: Yeah.

K: And we can talk about that later on. So one of my ... kind of ways of teaching feminist theology is that every class that I do is a feminist theology class, regardless of the subject that I'm teaching. So I'm teaching this class on Liturgical Theology at the Eucharist. It's awesome. I'm really enjoying it. We're reading queer theology in it. We're reading feminist theology in it. We're reading black theology in it as par for the course. So I'm wanting them to come out as well-rounded theologians at the end of it. How can I do that if I'm only giving them dead white

men to read? And liturgical theology, right? It's harder. Like it's a challenge for me to think, right, hang on a minute, who am I setting to read? Whose voices am I amplifying in the classroom? And generally, I think in those contexts, students kind of respond to that pretty well. So the class I taught today was on Trinity and Gender, and it's an MPhil class. So some of my students in there are ordinands, but not all of them. It's a master's class, but actually a whole bunch of my PhD students just kind of turn up because it's a really great class. So we were reading Julian of Norwich and Janet Martin Soskice. Fantastic.

And yeah, where things get tricky, often teaching in a confessional context where people often do want to hold on to some kind of sexed distinction between male and female, and find the idea of gender as something socially constructed rather than God-given to be challenging. Like not insurmountable, but if you've never encountered that before and you're in your kind of mid-20s, early 30s, that's a big thing to kind of come across and have disrupt your kind of ... way of thinking. So sometimes people get stuck there. There's some perennial kind of questions, you know, "Is it useful to use feminine language for God ..." (is something we were talking about today) "as a strategy for thinking through the masculine nature of the Trinity and the way in which, you know, if God is male, then the male is God?"

Interestingly, what I have found is that ... this is the second year I've taught that class. It's mostly women that take it. In fact, almost exclusively, it doesn't have to be. It's open for everybody. I find that problematic and it's easy for people to opt out of learning because they see something as, they see feminist theology as something that women do. They see it as something that's dangerous and not proper. Yeah, sorry, I've digressed. Anyway, back to my classroom. Actually, most of the students I've encountered tend to be pretty open. There are kind of points of conflict and sometimes that's about, you know, whether trans women are really women. You know, we've been reading this year, Susannah Cornwall's *Gender Theology*, which has been fantastic, but it's really provocative and requires people to think through what it might mean to understand God as a being in whom gender is both non-existent and also in excess. We've been kind of wrestling with apophaticism a lot. It's rich and generally well-received. The places where people get stuck are not insurmountable, but just often just really new.

H: Yeah, kind of paradigm-blasting.

K: Yeah, yeah. And some of that's really sad, right? Feminist theology isn't tall enough. I didn't do any feminist theology until I was a PhD student. In fact, I did an entire undergraduate degree without ever reading any women, not even feminist theology. I just didn't read any women.

H: Yeah, I encountered feminist theology in my PhD as well. I have to have read some. I read Julian, etc.

K: Okay, yeah. Anyone who was sort of a feminist theologian was like, "Oooh, don't let your friends see you checking that out."

K: You know, I'm ... just 20 years ago, but women were doing theology 20 years ago. They just weren't on my reading list as an undergrad.

H: Well, and you and I both have been told pretty explicitly just not to do feminist theology and or not to call it feminist theology. So there's a very real dynamic at play there too.

K: When I was a master's student and I was applying for PhD funding, and what I wanted to do wasn't explicitly feminist because I hadn't actually ever really kind of read any feminist stuff, but it was about Mary, about the Virgin Mary, and a very senior female theologian, a UK theologian, said to me, "Look, Karen, if you want to be taken seriously as an academic, you need to stop doing all that woman stuff." Fortunately, I was quite bullish, and I was like, "I'm pretty happy with what I'm doing, kind of cracked on." But yeah, I've never forgotten it. And I know what she means, right? Actually, there are faculties that would not employ me because I specialize in feminist theology.

B: Well, I'll make the confession that I made earlier to you, Hannah; as an undergrad theology student, I think I had a choice of taking an Augustine class that was going to put me in the classroom at eight o'clock on a Friday morning, or I could take this feminist theology class, which I think I met once a week for like three and a half hours, and then I could have my Friday free. And I was like, "Well, done." Right? So I took the feminist theology class because I could go out on Thursday nights and sleep in on Friday, and this class changed my life. So this is with Catherine LaCugna, the Trinitarian scholar, who actually died of cancer in the middle of our class, while we were reading her book, "God With Us."

K: These are our texts for next week. We're reading.

B: Oh my gosh, Catherine LaCugna! Oh ... tender heart, so patient with, at least for me, I'll speak for myself. It took me the semester to catch up. I was like, "What?" I mean, this was 1996. And I'm just so thankful, both for the kind of urgency that she had around this work—it was needed yesterday; and her utter generosity of patience as I was just sort of grappling with new language. And, you know, we swim in the patriarchy. So we're fish in water. "What do you mean, water?"

K: We don't see it. Exactly.

B: We don't see it. So.

K: amazing.

B: Would you say a word about Mary? I feel like if you want to start a fight in theology, you start saying things about Mary. So what kinds of fights have you been having?

K: Oh, I haven't had that many fights, but maybe I just don't talk about her enough. Like nobody's ever asked me to teach a class on Mary. So maybe it's not needed here. I don't know. So I can't escape her. Every time I think I'm done with her, she pitches back up again. When I went off to do my PhD, I thought I was going to be a Mariologist. And then like three months into my PhD, I discovered trauma theology. And I was like, that's me. I'm sold. That kind of never

escaped Mary, but my kind of dominant interest kind of went elsewhere. I've just finished editing a book on pregnancy and theology, which will be out in July. (Small plug there.) We're very excited. I edited it with Claire Williams. We've herded cats for two years. We now have this amazing volume. And I put in a little bit of my, it was actually a bit that my viva examiners and my PhD told me to take out of the PhD. And I loved it so much. I've never let it go. So I put in this thing.

I've got a chapter that's called "Pregnancy, Human and Divine." And it's about the relationship between Mary's flesh and the body of Christ and the difference between Mary's pregnancy and other pregnancies and whether or not we can then take Mary's pregnancy as a model for human pregnancy, in general. (Spoiler, no, we can't.) So yeah, that's... I've kind of put that in there. I'm really interested to see what people make of it because it's quite biological. So talking a lot about like mitochondrial DNA. The mitochondrial DNA for women is passed down and it's lost for men. So there's this kind of, in Jesus's body, a kind of legacy of women. But because there's no male sperm, it's missing the legacy of men that he would normally get. So I just like, "Oh, I'm fascinated by that." Like I'm sure the biologists would be like, "That's not how it works, Karen." But I did my best with the sciences. So I've done that one.

Another thing I wrote recently was about Mary the crone, where I've been thinking about Mary after the resurrection, because in kind of apocryphal and early Christian texts, you know, she lives until she's in her eighties. And so I use this text called *The Life of the Virgin* by Maximus the Confessor. He talks about Mary, the kind of, life of Mary beyond Jesus's ascension, where she's a leader in that she teaches them how to preach. And she teaches them how to pray and she teaches them what Jesus is like. And, you know, she tries to leave Jerusalem and kind of let the church community grow. And she's kind of turned back and sent back by God into the community and made to kind of stay there. And I've drawn that into conversation with Nicola Slee's work on ... she has a little book called *The Book of Mary*. And Nicola Slee has this amazing poem about Pentecost and it's the older Mary, Mary the crone, who sat with the children in the church. And the spirit begins to move and Mary's eyes light up because she's been there before. And she tells the children about Pentecost. Oh, just love it. So I try not to get in many fights with it. I know she's a bit contentious for feminist theologians. I think there's much to be gained from creative reflection with Mary. And I really appreciate it, like, theologically and like for my own kind of spirituality as well.

B: It may be that I'm just being shaped by a conversation that I had just yesterday with Teresa Berger, in fact, and the Roman Catholic students who are gathering to plan the Feast of the Annunciation service in Marquand Chapel. Yeah. Right. And so, "How sort of Mary-forward do we want to be? How sort of Roman Catholic do we want to show up in a traditionally reformed chapel space?" So it's all on the mind.

K: Amazing. Yeah. I mean, we wrestle with that here, right? We're, Westcott House is an Anglican Theological College. And whilst it might once have had a very kind of Anglo-Catholic tradition, it doesn't really have that. It's much more varied now. And we have, you know, some students who are big fans of the BVM and some who are like, "She is not important to me at all. I will happily sing a song at Advent about her. But other than that, I'm not really bothered." It's always really interesting.

H: Wow. So how did feminist theology become important to you? Was it through Mary? Was it a different way?

K: Well, I spent 15 years from being about age of 14 in a charismatic evangelical church that I got kind of converted and saved into that was strongly complementarian. And I can look back now and see that I was profoundly shaped by narratives that I heard at the front of the church, the visuals that I saw of who could be in leadership, who could preach. But also as a teenage girl, the kind of models of marriage and relationship that I saw, you know ... my youth leader got married at 18. She didn't kiss her husband until they got like, and "I pronounce you man and wife" and everyone was like, "Oh my gosh, that's amazing." And I was like, "All right, okay, that's what I should do." (That's not what happened—But you can't see me on the podcast doing my little aside into my hand). But anyway, like, there were no women in leadership except for children's work, which is okay. So there was this expectation of marriage. I got married at 22, I was an old maid. So wrong. And then you produce babies, you know, that was that was the job. And when you start producing babies, you go down to part-time work, you might stop working altogether. And that was appropriate. And I've written widely about my experiences of multiple pregnancy losses during that time, which eventually led to the breakdown of my marriage, but also leaving the church. Church did not know what to do with me as somebody that couldn't fulfill that.

H: Yeah, you weren't fitting in that box.

K: I didn't fit. Yeah. And they just didn't know what to do with me. Well, so it was awful; but like really good things came out of it. And I, I was a secondary school teacher. So I quit my job and went and enrolled on a master's degree. And then I was really fortunate and got some PhD funding and went off with a PhD. I started to think about Mary, I couldn't even tell you why, but in my masters at Nottingham... and Mary Cunningham, who's an Orthodox nun, I think she's amazing. She taught this class on Mary; I was the only person in it. So me and Mary sat and talked about Mary.

H: Wow.

K: Two hours every week. It was so cool. And I can't even remember why I picked it beyond the fact that I quite like Mary Cunningham. And I was like, "Well, this sounds cool, I'd enjoy it." And there wasn't much on the curriculum that was about women. So my 20th-century theology was Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and Hans van Balthazar. That was it. Right? I did that, I did Dante, and I did Henri de Lubac. And then I did Mary, that was my other thing. And then I ended up doing my dissertation at Mary's. So I kind of started getting into Mary and then that kind of led to the PhD proposal. And I was quite anxious about the term "feminist." I didn't identify as feminist. I was quite anxious about feminist theologians. I pitched up in my first PhD supervision with Siobhán Garigan and I was like, "I'm quite anxious about feminist theologians. I don't really think they've got anything to say to my project." And she told me to get a grip and sent me away to read a whole load of feminist theologians. And she was quite right.

So I read Rosemary Redford-Reuther there, and I read Beth Johnson. I read Dolores Williams and Serene Jones and Nicola Slee and Kelly Brown Douglas and just discovered this whole world; that I knew I loved theology, but I did not know theology could be like that. I didn't know it could be so creative and so liberative. And that was so attractive to me. It was a way of kind of holding on to all of the good things that I really appreciate about the Christian tradition, whilst, I guess, really recognizing that theology is a human endeavor and that therefore it can be wrong, and that there is space within theology to kind of reclaim and reshape the goods of the Christian tradition that kind of do better justice to our attempts to speak about God. And I had never encountered that before. So it gave me hope, I think, having come out of what I could kind of at that point reflect back on a church experience that had been incredibly damaging. It gave me hope that things could be better, and started to help me articulate who I was and what my faith looked like.

So for me, my experience of academic study has always been intertwined with my own faith experience, my own kind of spirituality. So I've done joke that I became an Anglican because of my Ph.D. I niched up in Exeter Cathedral and then before you knew it, I was being received into the church and bish, bash, bosh. Now I'm academic Dean at an Anglican theological college. It didn't take long. But I would say, oh my goodness, it genuinely changed my life. And more than that, it changed my relationship with God. And therefore it changed the kind of theology that I felt I'm able to produce out of my own body.

H: Yeah. Yeah.

K: Just, oh my goodness, this has been quite the journey over the last decade for me.

H: Yeah.

K: Zero to, you know, heading up a network of feminist theology that's worldwide and really exciting.

H: Which is just like taking on a life of its own so quickly. Yeah.

H: So some; I have a group of students right now who are really struggling to see the link between the study of academic theology and their call to ministry. And I have a very similar experience to yours, which is that my spiritual life has more often than not been fueled by my theologizing. But I completely see where they're coming from. And it's a really common struggle for people studying theology to have trouble in their spiritual lives in tandem. What kind of words do you have for people in that position who are kind of studying academic theology, wondering what the point is, but really have a heart for the church, that kind of a thing?

K: Yeah. So we actually at the start of the academic year, not this year, but last year with one of my colleagues, we ran a session for all our returning students. And we used Simone Weil's work on attention, and attention and its relationship to prayer. And we made them do a bit of Simone Weil at the start of the year. But we use that as a kicking off point to think about what it means to pay attention to things, not to get them right, but that the attention, in and of itself, is a good

thing. And that that's developing something useful and spiritual within us. And so we did some work with them around prayer, attention, and academic study, and trying to enable them to start to see academic study as part of their prayer life. I wouldn't say it was like super successful, but it had some success. I have a Ph.D. student who prays before he starts his Ph.D. study each day. We use the Thomas Aquinas' prayer for students, which I just love. We gave that to our students as way of encouraging them to see that when they're sitting down to study, this is part of their worship. It's part of their prayer. It's feeding them in the same way that their prayer in chapel is supposed to be feeding them.

H: Totally.

K: It's hard. I get it. I totally get it. And I would say there were days in my PhD and there are days now where I'm like, I'm getting nothing from this. This is dry as you like.

H: Or it's like really frustrating.

K: Yeah. It's totally contrary to like, what it is that I'm actually kind of feeling I'm going to do. But yeah, I think we've tried to kind of recognize and address that and repeatedly address it. But I'm lucky, in Westcott's context, in that I think I have a number of colleagues who are like research-active and would talk about their research and their own spiritual lives as being deeply entwined. And that, we've been trying to make that the kind of culture here. But it's hard, right, especially for ordinands who are studying, and their own placements, and they're doing like a formational track. You know, they're real busy. It's easy to not see this as a gift. And that's okay as well. I think just kind of kind of bring them back to the idea that the things we pay attention to cultivate an attitude of prayer within us. You know, it doesn't matter how good the grades are. It's the attention itself that is the gift.

B: I was just on retreat with some of our students at Holy Cross Monastery and we spent a couple of days in silence together at the beginning of Lent. And this was precisely the subject of our conversation. How do we integrate the head and the heart? How do we cultivate a kind of attentiveness when most of the time we're actually distracted? Attention really is the mother of almost every other activity, right? And so if we don't know how to be awake and alert, right? This was Jesus' invitation the night before he died, to stay awake with him, right? And so I'm really excited to hear that it's sort of foundational for y'all. And, you know, those are seeds that you plant that, you know, you may not see germinating now, but I've got to believe that many will have that light bulb moment. Oh, that's what Karen was talking about. Oh, I get it now.

K: Yeah, I hope so. Also, kind of this idea that they're not finished when they leave here. There's two things with that. Firstly, that we would encourage them to continue to think of themselves as theologians as they move forward into ministry. We try to use that language in our classrooms, as referring to our students as theologians. But the other part of that is that we try and use language in the college of all of us, the staff as well, being in formation. So we talk about students being on a program of formation, but I will also talk about myself as being formed by the classes I teach and by the time I spend in chapel. And it's helpful to see all of us on a kind of

movement together, that we're not these kind of finished products that are trying to churn out other finished products.

H: Yes. I need to ask you about this class that you're teaching where you're doing different prayer practices. How's that going? You have anything to tell?

K: Yeah, it's not a class actually. So we have a tutorial system here in Westcott House where each student is assigned a tutor and our tutor groups, so I have about six in my tutor group, we meet together during the week. We're a small community, so we see plenty of each other, but we intentionally, all the tutor groups meet together on a Friday morning after morning prayer. And we have breakfast together. And so we take it turns to provide breakfast. Students do it, I do it. And what we're supposed to do is just have various conversations. So I've been here for a year and a half, and the first year in a term, students signed up to lead conversations. And we talk about All Saints kind of at the end of October. And we talk about our favorite saints or spiritual practices that help us grow or if we'd organized a Eucharist previously, kind of reflecting on how that had gone or "What's your favorite book?"-- different topics.

But just at the end of the Micheltas term, just before Christmas, my tutor group decided that they wanted to be a bit more intentional about what we were doing on our Friday mornings. And I used to lead a master's degree program in Christian spirituality. So what they said was, we want to focus on different spiritual practices. I was like, "Cool, what do you want to do?" So we brainstormed like a massive list of things. And I just allocated them to the weeks that were left of Lent term and Easter term. And so we have been experimenting. So we've done the Jesus prayer; big hit. Everybody's a big part of that. It is interesting, like everybody had done it before. We talk about it on a Friday morning, and then we intentionally do it for a week. And then we check back in the next Friday and then the next student teaches us the next practice and then we go off and do that. So we've done the Jesus prayer. We've done how to use rosaries, daily offices (which we pray morning and evening prayer anyway). But what we ended up doing was we discovered that we loved the midday prayer in common worship. And so we have as a tutor group added in midday prayer. So we meet together to pray in the middle of the day, which is amazing. This week we've been using the examen, which has been fantastic. We had a fantastic week a couple of weeks ago where we used Cole Arthur Riley's *Black Liturgies* book, the new book that's just come out. And I photocopied them a kind of morning office that we had to use for the week. And they loved it so much. They did a bulk order and all ordered the book. And then they've been using them in intercessions, in morning and evening prayer in the chapel, we've used them for praying on Ash Wednesday. Her Ash Wednesday meditation was amazing. Interestingly, it's brought us really close as a group, which is weird because like technically we're not really doing anything much more different than we were doing before. But yeah, it's been amazing. And we're only kind of, not even halfway through. We've got another two weeks of term left.

H: I mean, it's a different level of depth and human connection than just talking about a book or something like that. Yeah, just talking about a book. I love to talk about books. But Rowan Williams in his episode also talked a lot about the Jesus Prayer. And I didn't share this story at that point ...

K: Come clean, Hannah; tell us.

H: I have like my own experience of the Jesus Prayer. And I almost responded to you on Twitter X or whatever with this story. And I was like, "This is a little too wild for the Internet." So now I ... guess I'll share it with the Internet.

K: Yeah, in the Internet.

H: I used to have a job as a performer at Disneyland and one of my roles was so stressful to me because I, since the time I was a toddler, have been afraid of fireworks. And in this dancing role, I had to jump straight into fireworks that were coming at me, because it's supposed to look like I came out of thin air, obviously. So I had to do this night after night, twice a night, for my job. And I was so afraid of it that like as I was waiting, I would be doing breathing exercises with the Jesus Prayer, fully costumed. Like, the music amping up behind me going, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, Have mercy on me, a sinner!" I have yet to discern whether this is a good or a bad thing. But now, like when my heart rate gets really high and I can feel stress in my body, the words start just happening.

K: Oh, wow.

H: Like I feel like maybe that shouldn't always be a stress response. Like maybe I should pray those words also when I'm not feeling like I'm about to die.

K: But this is what the group was saying was like when we talked about the Jesus Prayer, everybody was like, "Yes, I've used it in times of great anxiety." Somebody was like, "I get very frightened going to the dentist and it's my meditation at the dentist." And so what was fun was doing this intention. One of the ways I ended up using it was, if I get to chapel two, three minutes early, I've got kind of a set of prayer beads, I keep in my pocket. And just do like I just keep doing it until the prayer, the kind of office starts. Yeah. And I've taken to carry the prayer beads in my pocket. So every time I put my hand in my pocket, I catch on it. I'm just starting to do it. And yeah, because I don't even really used it as a like panic attack medication type thing. Which I don't think Jesus minds.

H: I think I'll look forward to the heavenly conversation where we really hash that out.

K: And I think it's just like, well, is that the best way praying? I don't mind. It's fine.

H: I mean, better to pray than not to pray.

B: Well, this is maybe a great transition to trauma because that sounded terrifying to me, Hannah.

H: To be clear, I wouldn't name that as dramatic.

B: That's the best part of the podcasting with you. I get to learn things about you. And not surprisingly, it's also true for me. I detest fireworks. I mean, the Fourth of July is the low point of the year. But there's been so much conversation in the last generation or two about the pervasiveness of trauma in our world. And thankfully, so much more awareness and so much more compassion and sensitivity. And I just wonder how you became interested in trauma and speak a little bit about what you're finding at the intersection of trauma and theology. It's everywhere, I suspect.

K: Right. I became interested in trauma theology by accident. That's all the best academic career moves happen. My PhD supervisor, one of them is Siobhán Garrigan, and she happened to mention some writing by her friend, Serene Jones, on trauma. And I was like, that sounds cool. So I went and kind of tracked it down. And what I found was Serene Jones's 2001 article in modern theology, which is called *Hope Deferred*, and is about pregnancy loss and infertility. And she writes out of her own experience of miscarrying and of pastoring those who have miscarried as well. I'd never read anything like it. Siobhán had no idea that I had had a number of miscarriages. And I didn't—to this day, don't even know if that's the piece of work she was meaning to talk about when she said Serene Jones. But I read it and I was supposed to be writing a book review of something for Siobhán. And like a week later, I came back and I said, "I think I've overstepped." And I gave her what I'd written. And basically, I'd like started this book review and then grown some trauma legs quite quickly and like, just run with it. And Siobhán was like, "This is what you should be doing your Ph.D. on." And she was quite right.

So I did like a bit of a crash course. There wasn't much. So took in like over a decade ago now. Pretty sure I read almost everything written in trauma theology within the three years. The field was so small that you could kind of count the major publications on two hands. I can't keep up with it now. And that's amazing. So I have Ph.D. students working in trauma, and they're like referencing books. I'm like, "I've not heard of this one." This is so cool. This is the only way I keep up to date with the reading. I really appreciate it. For me, trauma theology and feminist theology, they're obviously not the same thing. But for me, they kind of sing out of the same hymn sheet, in that they're both interested in taking the experience of our body seriously, accounting for or taking notice of the way in which, that the experiences of our body shape the kinds of theologies that we are able to write and also able to affirm as well. And so there's a kind of natural connection. In fact, Katie Cross and I edited a book a few years ago called *Feminist Trauma Theologies*. We were trying to make that connection quite explicit. Interestingly, Shelly Rambo wrote the foreword for that where she talks about she was Serene Jones's Ph.D. student. And she talks about how obviously it was feminist, because we were all feminists. But we never like called it feminist. It was just we were the people doing it. And so it has this kind of feminist root, feminist legacy that has blossomed and flourished in lots of really interesting ways. And church needs to become trauma-informed. And to do that, it needs good trauma-informed theologies and it needs pastors and priests that are trauma-informed and understand what it is that we're talking about when we're talking about trauma. Yeah.

H: One of the reasons I was really excited when I saw you were launching this feminist theology network is because in sort of a lone wolf kind of a way, I had done my due diligence, literature

review of feminist theology, blah, blah, whatever. And just kind of noticed on my own that theology calling itself feminist theology has like trickled away.

K: Right.

H: But it seems to me, and what you're saying about these observations kind of tracks with my hypothesis, which is that like, it's dovetailed into trauma theology in a really significant way. And our usage of the word feminist has changed a lot since the 80s and 90s. So that's significant too.

K: Yeah. I just ... one of the things I found really interesting is that feminist theology is now having another moment.

H: Yeah, I think so.

K: Actually, it's kind of in the ascendancy. Again, people are excited about what it might mean. People are hungry for finding out more about it. And that's like people of all generations. So it's not just kind of people that, you know, missed out on the kind of flourishing stuff of the 90s. And I think part of that is maybe it's kind of post-economic crash 2008 onwards as the kind of resurgence of tradwife kind of culture. And I think that part of that's to do with the Internet and kind of making these things kind of really popular and accessible to people.

H: I also think part of it is looking in the mirror and realizing actually things in church life and home lives haven't changed. Like all this amazing work has been done. But when we look at our friends, our families, our churches, like the cash-out hasn't quite been accomplished.

K: This is it. So I was asked recently to write a survey of feminist theology for there's a new volume of Ford's Modern Theologians coming out. And I felt the weight of that request like super heavy on me.

H: Wow.

K: But one of the kind of sections that I was kind of told that I had to kind of write about was the influence, achievement, and future agenda of feminist theology. And I was like, "Oh, OK." But what I actually ended up doing was looking at an edited collection from 1990 that was written by Anne Loades. And she wrote in the kind of foreword about the situation of feminist theology in 1990. And as I read it, I thought ... that's still exactly the same today.

H: Yeah, that's it.

K: Talks about like the Christian tradition is still fundamentally ambivalent for women. Christianity still offers women really unhelpful gender construction. The male-related symbol and metaphor is still given priority. We still need to do better attending to experiences of difference in class and ethnicity.

H: Yeah.

K: Like that's still the same.

H: Well, the way I see it and this may be different from the way you see it. And actually, I have some things I can email to you and share with you so we can keep talking about this offline. But the way I see it is some really important, incisive critiques have been made by people like Rita Nakashima Brock. But, or, and, that was difficult work that was done. And at the same time, it's easier to critique something than to build something new. And so we're in a stage now, I think, where the projects we have to undertake are telling the stories in fresh ways. And actually, this does bring me to kenosis and atonement and things like that. Do you have any words of wisdom for people wanting to parse out what is kenosis? How do I interpret that well? What is atonement? How do I interpret that well? "Those kinds of issues.

K: Yeah. OK. Wow, yeah, okay. Well, kenosis, okay; I've got no truck with it whatsoever. So self-emptying, self-giving, self-sacrificing ... women are socialized to do those things, especially in familial context. But also in academic contexts, also in business contexts, and work contexts. And I just don't think that feminist theology can endorse at least a traditional version of kenotic theology. And I think traditionally theology has done a really bad job at saying, "This is what it means to be like Christ." So like Jesus's suffering was redemptive. Fine. You might like to argue that, you don't have to argue it. I'm increasingly not on board with the idea of redemptive suffering. But the problem comes in that, that kind of particular suffering then is writ large to imply that all suffering is redemptive and that what it means to follow Christ is to be engaged in that form of suffering. And I'm ... not a big fan of Paul, really, Saint Paul. He talks a lot about the life of the Christian as one of Christ-like suffering and self-denial. Fine. But that's like one day of Jesus's life, right? The passion. I'm also interested in Jesus's life and ministry. I think we can be Christ-like in lots of ways. We can be Christ-like in hospitality and welcome and joyfulness and abundance and excess and hanging out with our friends. And I've been massively inspired in the last year or so. I've been reading again, Lisa Isherwood's *The Fat Jesus* and just this beautiful image of an abundant Christology where, yes, Jesus suffers. And he bears his suffering in a particular way. But he also is full of joy. And he's also the person that transforms water into wine and hangs out and eats fish on a beach with his friend. I think we get into trouble when we say to be Christ-like is to do *this* thing.

I heard Kelly Brown Douglas speak. We were really fortunate that she came to Westcott earlier this year. And she just made this tiny little point about how in the Creed we say he was born and then he suffered and died. And we skipped 30 years. And I'm like, "Oh, and they're the best bit, right?" Like they're challenging, but they are just as much part of what it means to be Christ-like as the other bits. All super important. I'm not devaluing those. But what I get frustrated about is that, yes, Jesus Christ is kenotic. And yet that doesn't mean that he spends all 33 or however many years of his life in suffering and self-denial. You know, he has a good time along the way. We need a bigger vision of what it means to be Christ-like because if we're going to say to be Christ-like is about self-denial and suffering and it's God of Gethsemane through to the resurrection, we're doing ourselves a disservice, but we're doing the incarnate God a disservice as well. That's too small a vision for me. Sorry, I got really excited there. I got

into preaching mode.

B: No, no. And your excitement actually led me to want to zoom out actually and ask a big question. So, you know, I'm a father of daughters, both of whom are just around 20, and they're strong women and they're deeply rooted feminists. And they're not so sure about the church.

H: Yeah.

B: Because they haven't been in your classroom, Karen. And they've been in parishes that, you know, we're all too familiar and all too patriarchal. And they're wondering, "You know, is there is there a space for me anywhere in this tradition?" And of course, when when dad sort of describes conversations like we're having today and when I, you know, roll out my litany of feminist theologians and saints and mentors, they're not so sure. And so I wonder. So here's a tall order. You know, speaking to, you know, a 20 year old who's open, who's curious.

K: Yeah.

B: But who's at a moment of decision like, am I going to embrace this, you know, in my adult life? How do you speak to them? What do you talk to them about? What stories do you tell to awaken their imagination?

K: Gosh, that's really hard. You can be what you can see, right? So I think if you want women to be making choices to be in churches, then they need to be encountering parts of the church where there are women who are like them. You know what? I have found ... don't laugh. Don't judge me. I have found TikTok to be an amazing experience.

H: Oh, my gosh. Yes.

K: I've encountered so many women priests on TikTok that have filled me with joy and brought me closer to God. Like I'm just ... I don't have enough of them in my life. And I have encountered them like you say what you like about social media. And a lot of it is absolute toxic hell. But oh, my goodness. There are some amazing, amazing women and particularly women priests who have just ... Like really blessed me. And, you know, I'm in a tradition where, you know, we do ordain women, but largely nothing has changed. And the masculine patriarchal structures of what it means to be a priest are still very much in place. But I think for me, part of the journey has been not just seeing, you know, great priests on social media, which is fab, but discovering the women in the tradition for myself.

I discovered the Beguines a few years ago. You know, they are amazing. I've discovered Hadewijch, and she was bonkers. And I loved Marjorie Kempe. Oh, I love Marjorie. You know, I just say, oh, she's, she's full of emotion and she's loud and she's messy and leaky. And Julian says, "This is from God." And I love it. Yeah, you can only be what you can see. And one of the things I think feminist theology needs to do is to be more active in dismantling the structures of patriarchy. I think we've pointed out the flaws. But actually, we need to be advocating and enabling change to happen. I don't have a kind of recipe of what that change would look like.

But it can't look the way it currently is, because why then would any person of any gender want particularly to join the church right there? They're the declining group.

But I'm equally I'm challenged by I read last year, Abby Day's work on *The Religious Lives of Older Anglican Laywomen*. That's quite a mouthful of a title, but she basically spent two years hanging out in parish churches with older Anglican lay women. So they were in their late 70s upwards and discovering what their spirituality looked like. Oh, it's incredible. These women are in our churches. They're the reason the churches are still going. We have not done justice to women in our church yet. And I don't know how we do it, but I want to be doing it.

H: I love it. Well, we've been talking for longer than it seems like we've been talking for. So I wonder if we can ask you one final question that we do really like to make a practice of asking people, which is, "What is giving you hope right now?"

K: Oh, OK. The Feminist Theology Network has given me hope.

H: Oh, amen. Oh, it's ...

B: Could you share just a little bit about what that is?

H: Yeah. Good idea.

K: I was lying on a sun lounger in Lanzarote and ... I had had a number of people previously. I was like—you know, when you're finally on vacation, like all the conversations you've had, like start to make sense in your head? I had like a couple of Ph.D. students and then a couple of like women, vicars who I was friends with, just be like, "Oh, where would I go in the UK or anywhere really, to like meet other feminist theologians and find out about what's happening?" And I was like, "Huh, I don't know. And if I don't know, that probably means it isn't that." So I thought I should start something. And so basically, it's an informal gathering of people who are interested in feminist theology. So it's all genders, it's around the world, all occupations, all kinds of occupations. It's not just academics, not just clergy, all kinds of people are involved in it. And the last few months, we've been gathering every couple of months to listen to a speaker, to ask some questions, to find out more about different types of feminist theology and to spend some time together.

It's the one Zoom thing that I've been to where people are like, "The breakout groups are amazing!" Not the bit everyone's like, "Oh, no, not the breakout groups." People are like, "Oh, I got to meet so many cool people and I wish we had more time." So that's fantastic. So that's the kind of starting point; we're hoping to launch a mentoring scheme later on in the year. I'm hoping that we will have a summer kind of event on pregnancy and theology, because that's when the book will come out and I could have some of my amazing contributors give little papers.

I'm hoping that we'll have some of the best papers. Hannah's organizing something on feminist and queer homiletics in September, which is going to be so cool. I'm really looking forward to that. So that's what it is. But the best thing about it is that we have a WhatsApp community which anyone can join. And it's pretty lively. People asking for book recommendations, people kind of making plans as some of like local groups, kind of making

plans to meet up, sharing events. It's just been really great. So that's giving me hope.

If I can add two more things to this, things that are giving me hope. The new generation of ordinands that I'm teaching gives me hope that the church will be better. And that's a good thing. The other thing that I found here, although I work at Westcott House, we are part of what's called the Cambridge Theological Federation. And I also teach in the Divinity Faculty at Cambridge University. And one of the things I've found to be really life-giving is working with colleagues who are deeply committed to theological education. I'm a teacher at heart. That's my vocation. And I just find that to be really life-giving, and makes me hopeful for the future of theology.

H: Well, thank you so, so, so much for spending time with us.

K: It's a pleasure.

H: Such a sparkle joy in my week. And I'm really excited to share this with our listeners.

K: Thank you. Me too.

B: Absolute blessing, Karen. Thank you so much for all your work. You go with our prayers and our hope that we can meet someday in person. I hope our paths. Yeah. That would be amazing.

B: Thank you for listening to *The Leader's Way*. We hope you were encouraged and inspired. To learn more about this episode, visit our website at berkeleydividend.yale.edu/podcast.

H: Rate and review us and follow the podcast to make sure you never miss an episode. Follow Berkeley at Yale on Instagram for quotes from the podcast and more.

B: Until next time.

H: The Lord be with you.