Comment Suppers

Fall 2023

The In-Between

BY MIRANDA KENNEDY

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THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF FEMINISM AND EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANITY

I first began seeing myself as a feminist thanks to a bad teenage boyfriend. We were living in Pittsburgh, one of many cities my parents had moved us in and out of, and I was experimenting with many things my mother didn't like: oversized black turtlenecks, red lipstick, smoking cigarettes, and the classic bad boyfriend. Sean was a few years older than I—I never really knew how many; he had no intention of going to college and may not have graduated from high school; and he wore a permanently sour look on his face that shadowed into a scowl when my parents were in sight.

Sean worked in a carpet shop, and I'd hang out there some afternoons after school. We'd sit outside and smoke, and when a customer approached, he'd lurch inside, sidle up to the wall, and unroll the massive carpets. It was then that his boss, a woman in her early forties with a mane of curly hair and flowy, ethnic-looking clothes, would call me over to her corner cushion. I was impressed by her yoga pigeon positions and the global travels she would describe.

One day, as Sean grimaced his way through his sales pitch to another vacillating shopper, his boss handed me a crisp new paperback with the startling title *Female Genital Mutilation in Africa*. The book contained a series of essays about the traditional practice of genital cutting maintained in some parts of the African continent to meet an ideal of female beauty. A couple of months later, the book she chose for me was *Fear of Flying*, the novel by Erica Jong that epitomized the sexual revolution of the 1970s. And so it went in my early feminist education: a random stream of books presented with very little context or commentary, but with the expectation that I would somehow be changed by them.

And I was. Because what was this world, where women cut their own daughters to make them marriageable, and elsewhere

they fantasized about rebuking society by cheating on their husbands with strangers? Neither of these books had anything to do with my life as I lived it as a sixteen-year-old in an American city with the world in front of me. But when Sean turned out to be an irreconcilably terrible boyfriend—demanding that I not go to college, throwing things at me, and then kissing my best friend's sister in front of me—well, I knew where to turn. Not to his boss, but to her book list.

Honestly, reading about genital mutilation and 1970s sexual liberation theory was not the best way to understand feminism. But it did make clear to me just how complicated feminism—or perhaps I should say feminisms—is: full of internal contradictions and wildly different place to place. It also led me to see this complexity as increasingly central to who I was. The more I read—Jane Austen, female slave narratives, the history of dowry, Sylvia Plath—the more I came to see the ways my biological gender had shaped me. Feminist theorists were debating which wave of feminism we were in—the second or third—but as I graduated high school, I was solidly in my own personal first wave. I was here, and I was pissed.

As I made my way to college and started carving out more of a sense of myself, being a woman felt essential to the process. My experience of feminism was increasingly wrapped up in recognizing the limitations imposed on women's actions or abilities. When I moved to Ireland and transferred to Trinity College, Dublin, I discovered further fodder for sorting out who I was. From the day Ireland was founded in 1937, it was intertwined with the Catholic Church; my first experience with feminism and Christianity was as a secular person living in a Catholic country. In the Ireland I moved to, abortion and same-sex marriage were both illegal, and in fact that year Ireland granted its very first divorce, to a terminally ill man.

Since then, same-sex marriage and abortion up to twelve weeks have been legalized in Ireland, and the church's influence has plummeted, following the exposure of six decades of sanctioned child sexual abuse in Catholic institutions. But in the late nineties, Ireland was still pretty Catholic, and my experience of living in a Catholic country was through its restrictions. As much as I loved Dublin—the Irish Sea, the grimy old man pubs, the poetry—my American self chafed against the limitations of a society based on religious order. The way I saw it at the time, limiting women's access to reproductive freedom was no different from enforcing a beauty ideal

based on marriage. Restricting women's ability to make their own sexual choices is telling them they must be a smaller, more limited version of themselves to be acceptable and appropriate.

It was clarifying to see things from another part of the world. It helped me start to work out what part of my perception of inequity for women was my own small experience of the world, and how much was general. In my first year of school in Dublin, I joined in abortion-rights marches in the streets. I banded together with some new women friends and started a publication that we called *Harlot Magazine*. We thought of it as a pro-sex, women-led exploration of femininity, pushing back against the stereotype of strident chides. Our vibe was whimsical, hand-drawn, and meandering. We dedicated one issue to female erotica, though none of us especially knew what that was, and this was too early in the internet era to really be able to figure it out.

There was one aspect of magazine publishing that we "Harlot girls" excelled at: having fun. One summer, we all travelled to southern France together and made a saucy, over-the-top photo essay remake of the fairy tale "The Princess and the Pea." When we held launch parties, my friends and I would get done up in lacy, fifties-era slips and many layers of makeup. (The makeup was supposed to be ironic, but I am not sure how many people saw it that way.) We printed flyers suggesting our attendees also dress like floozies of a nonspecific past. We'd traipse around Dublin like an excessive poof of peach-scented perfume, making a purposeful flutter by popping into pubs and twirling around. When men made comments on the street, we hollered and whistled back at them. We knew we were asking for it; that was the point. We were free, and we were in charge.

I carried my in-your-face swagger with me when I moved to New York City after college to explore journalism and book publishing. I loved the way women flaunted their bodies in the depths of summer in my new neighbourhood, not-yet-gentrified south Williamsburg. I refused to present my womanhood as either available for the taking for men or as a stowed-away, precious source of value to society.

It seemed a natural follow-on to push for reproductive rights, and activism became an important aspect of my budding social life in New York. If men could act on their sexual selves without consequence, then why shouldn't women? If men engaged in intimacy and then moved swiftly on to the next thing without emotional connection, then why shouldn't women be able to as well? If pregnancy

was holding women back from becoming the fullest versions of themselves, then why shouldn't it be eliminated as a concern? I became increasingly committed to a radically pro-choice view. I volunteered at abortion clinics to usher women inside. It was the era of Operation Rescue, with a lot of fear on both sides. I chose not to engage with the complexities of abortion. I had picked the women's side in high school, I'd remind myself, and now, ten years later, I simply refused to contemplate any grey or blurry edges. I knew I was acting just as starkly as the Christian activists who prevented women from entering the clinics. That was the point; this was war.

As time went on, the world no longer seemed obvious and stark in every way . . . or in any way. The blurring of my edges began when I left New York to go back overseas—this time to India. There are few places more culturally different from the West than India is: a country of extreme cultural and ethnic diversity with—at least at the time I was there—very little globalizing influence. It is consistently ranked as one of the most religious societies in the world.

I moved to New Delhi to try my hand as a reporter and stayed for five years. Over that time, India's ways wormed their way inside me and redefined who I was. It does not make sense that moving away from community, family, and friends to cover war and disaster would result in my becoming a more traditional person, and that had not been my plan. I'd purposely given up my New York boyfriend—a man I thought I'd loved enough to marry—in order to assert my independence and do the hardest thing: move eight thousand miles away and figure out India. But across many years of adventure, traditionalizing is exactly what happened.

I boarded the plane to Delhi with a list of contacts stuffed into my backpacker's backpack, including fellow journalists in India I was going to train and work alongside, and a family I was to stay with for a couple of weeks until I could rent a cheap apartment. The family connection was essential, because few Delhi landlords will rent a room to a single woman, even if she is white/American and perceived as well-off. An activist female friend who was a generation older helped me find a room to rent with a family that had space to spare. She also helped me with many other basics of living in a traditional society: while I'd been savvy enough not to bring the slips of my *Harlot Magazine* era, I didn't have enough loose, long clothes that protected against both the heat and judgmental gaze of the housewives in the market. She made me get rid of all my tank tops and knee-length skirts and pants, and then she helped me start to make sense

of the geography of this city and its many linguistic and cultural complexities.

Not long after I moved into the family home in a teeming Delhi suburb, the fan ground to a halt. I woke up sweating, and the woman of the house rapped on my door and told me to follow them to the roof. Up there the extended family settled in: aunts, uncles, and kids sat on blankets on the ground, while their parents took to string cots. There wasn't a single light to be seen in the neighbourhood. I could hear other families talking softly on their roofs around us.

I thought of it for years later, the natural ease that this large family had with one another in the midst of what would have been a major inconvenience anywhere in the US or Europe. But they matter-of-factly waited it out. They didn't play games or invent conversation topics. They did not expect anything from one another's company. And they wordlessly accepted me among them.

I was so charmed by the experience that I wrote home about it to the boyfriend I'd left in New York. Something about being accepted where I clearly didn't belong made me want to try harder to fit in. Over the next several years, I did everything I could to understand the expectations and beliefs of a Hindu-dominated culture and the social structures inside Indian families. Indians always say you learn about India through experiencing regional home-cooked food, and I also found I learned about the values and expectations of close-knit extended families through the experience of living with various Indian families in different parts of the country.

I always stood out though, and eventually that became tiring. After years of being greeted with low-grade shock by Indian aunties ("Aren't you sad and lonely, living here without anyone?"), I stopped replying that "Aloneness isn't loneliness," and admitted to myself that I wanted a community where I could belong.

I'd never especially expected to marry and was still my independent, wandering self, so I didn't exactly marry a deeply religious man and move in with his extended family. But my husband comes from a small community inside a small town in Georgia, and grew up with many of the shared values and expectations that I'd lacked in my peripatetic life of never quite belonging. He believed marriage was a way to draw in your friends and family and ask them to help you become the people you sought to become. I was convinced by that. He wanted to find a city neighbourhood to integrate into and raise a child in one place, a place she was knitted into the fabric of, knowing that through her we, too, would

become integrated. We had a daughter and created that beautiful thing of which he'd convinced me.

But as I reached the midway point of my life, I struggled with feeling this was not enough. The rich human relationships around me, the satisfactions of a good work life and of watching our daughter becoming, were wonderful—and yet still left me feeling lacking. I still felt lonely, even in my not-aloneness. I was working on a project about religion, and through an interview with the Christian thinker Tim Keller, I imagined for the first time what it was like to believe that our actions and plans were being even partly guided from above. Engaging with his thinking was profoundly compelling and disruptive. I looked up churches affiliated with his denomination, and without knowing anything else about it, I walked over there for services one winter morning.

The praise songs, the guitar and drums, the professions of faith from the pews and the raised arms—it was excessive, over-emotive, and also hard to trust. My experience of church until then had been in Anglican or Episcopalian parishes; growing up, we'd go for a number of years and then stop again. My parents always seemed dubious about Christian belief, and I'd absorbed that. At this church, though, there was an outright expectation that belief alone would fundamentally change your life and everything in it. At this church, each Sunday was a cry for deeper connectedness between people, especially across difference. The pastor would say that if you're attending a church where the music is familiar, then you're in the wrong church, because Jesus would push you to find belonging outside your comfort zone. I found myself wanting to go back the next week, in spite of myself.

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I did, and that encouragement to stretch beyond my comfort zone allowed me to overlook the gender politics and sexual ethics of this denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Looking it up online I discovered it had split from the rest of the Presbyterian Church over refusing women's ordination, insisting that all forms of homosexuality are sinful, and expecting all leaders to confess the inerrancy of

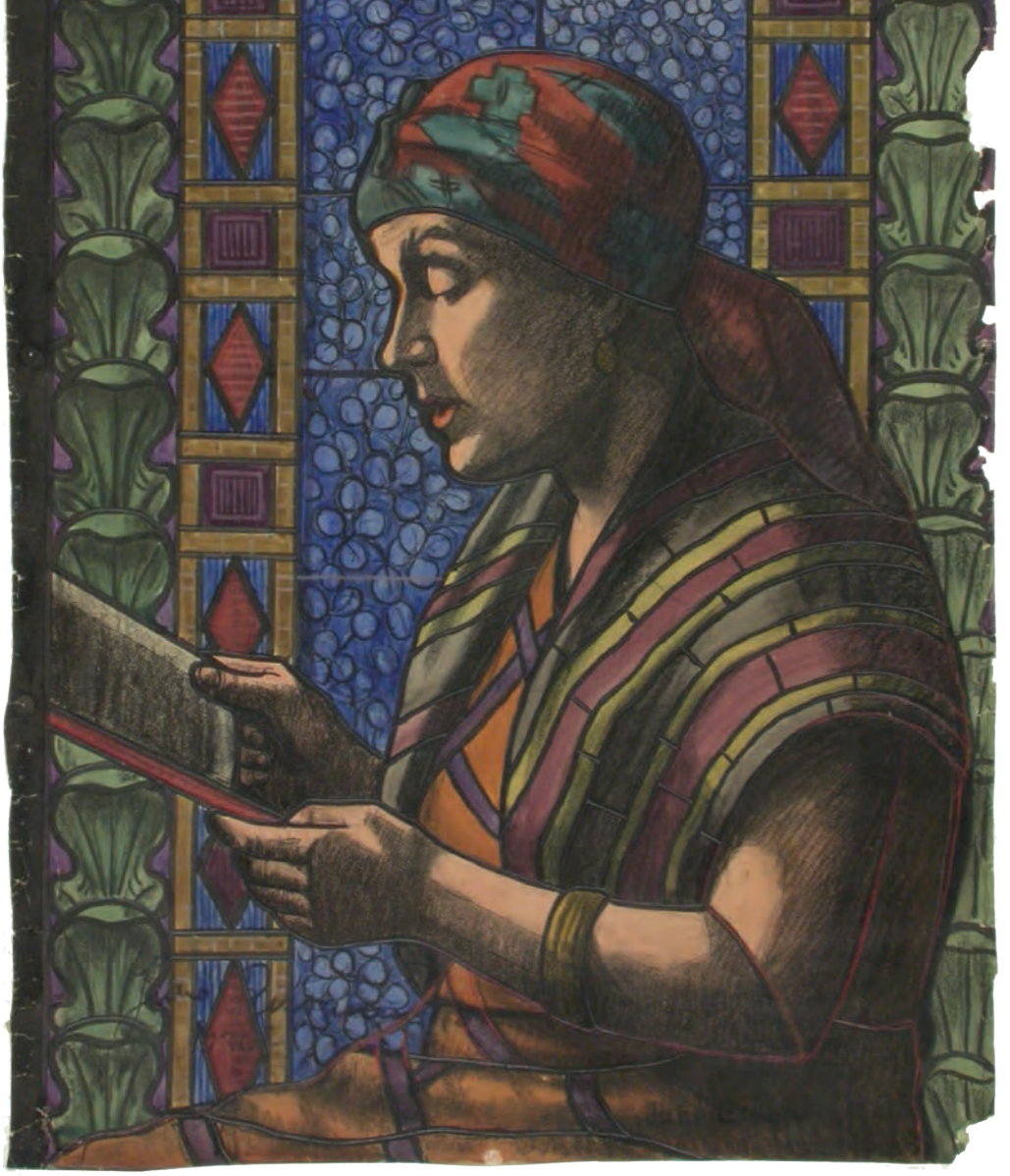
I was exhausted by the strident extremes of our culture, and many of my own stiff views had mellowed or become more complex.

Scripture. Turned out that the church I'd wandered into went against most of my life's beliefs. I was a rebel, an independent wanderer who had only in recent years felt a desire for any kind of real belonging. And suddenly this? No one in my life understood it. My family found it strange, my friends found it off-putting, and my husband wondered what had gone wrong.

At the time I struggled to explain it, even to him. But gradually I began noticing that I wasn't alone in putting elements of myself on hold in this congregation. A few weeks after I first attended, the pastor took me out to coffee, and chuckled when I described what a strange experience this church was for me: "I know, it requires a lot of cognitive dissonance, doesn't it?" he said. He strongly implied—but didn't exactly say—that he didn't agree with all the convictions of the denomination either. Already I had observed that some of the attendees would laugh off the beliefs about women as "extreme" and "silly," and point out that although women couldn't be ordained, they did serve in leadership roles at the church. I decided I'd go with that too. My faith still felt young and vulnerable. I felt I had to protect it, and that this church was the safe space for it, until it grew a little stronger.

My own feelings about feminism had become complicated in recent years anyway. Existing on a separate, angry plane from men had not helped women make a lot of progress. I was exhausted by the strident extremes of our culture, and many of my own stiff views had mellowed or become more complex. Abortion no longer seemed the unassailable right I'd once championed. I had struggled to have even one child and had been unable to have a second. This one life my husband and I had managed to create seemed so very fragile. Even before my Christian conversion, I'd started using the word "sacred" when I thought of her life. In the months and years since giving birth, I stopped believing abortion should be available to all women "free and on demand," as I used to marker onto my poster boards. Now I'd probably write "rare and limited." But I didn't talk to my old feminist buds about that.

The pastor at my new church—and pretty much everyone there—avoided talking about abortion, women, homosexuality, and sexual ethics generally. It was an urban church in a liberal city, and the pastor was well aware that bringing up these issues would be a losing battle.



Woman Reading, Sketch for Stained Glass by Juho Rissanen, 1930.
Finnish National Gallery

The strange unspokenness of it left me sometimes wondering and guessing, and at other times existing in a blissful unknowing. This, too, was new for me. I am a journalist; euphemism is generally my enemy.

My first real church friend helped me break through the Christian language barrier and start to engage with the church in a more direct way. She had grown up in a Christian fundamentalist household, attended a Christian liberal arts college, and worked in the professional Christian world, so she knew how to unlock evangelical coding. But she also had a healthy secular life outside the church and was trained as a lawyer, another straight-talking profession. When I met her she was in training to become a deacon; a couple years later our

pastor asked her to become the female equivalent of an elder. Because women cannot be ordained in the PCA, she couldn't get the title of elder but was promised many of the same powers.

It was not to be. A few months before Covid shut the country down, she and I were having wine on my back porch. She was talking about how she'd never had a relationship to speak of, so I asked her if she thought she was gay. She looked like she might fall off her chair; then she told me that in evangelical culture, asking this question is akin to asking someone if they like to have sex with animals. But I didn't grow up in evangelical culture. It didn't seem like a crazy question to me.

Soon after, she took a sabbatical from her job, resigned from her leadership role at the church, and gave up her membership, knowing she would be expected to live a life of sexual abstention if she continued attending. Her decision to leave made me see just how compartmentalized I'd been in my quest to belong there. For all these five years since becoming a believer through this church, I'd focused on the ways our church supported people through their difference and sought to see them in their fullness. I'd chosen to ignore the ways our church locked people out for their difference—and then justified that stance with Scripture.

Now that I was forced to engage with the other, less embracing side of my church, many things started to unravel. I started to wonder why the PCA had changed its views on race and slavery but not on women or homosexuality. If the denomination no longer used the Bible to justify slavery or race-based oppression, then why were its views on women still complementarian and women could not hold true leadership roles? My attending this church was now feeling less like a naive case of cognitive dissonance I'd decided to embrace for the sake of protecting my new faith, and more like a willful denial of conscience. Here I had sought out Christianity to help provide moral and ethical grounding in a sea of incoherence, and instead I found myself struggling to square these other, most basic inconsistencies.

I also had never been able to integrate my family into my church life. For years I'd attended this very family-orientated congregation alone. Sometimes I wondered whether new attendees thought I was a widow, since I wore a wedding ring but my husband was rarely in attendance. It was a constant source of sadness that my daughter wasn't growing up learning about this beautiful way of the world that had reshaped my life. I rarely talked about my Christian beliefs at home—not because my husband was opposed to my

being a Christian, but because he was opposed to the evangelical teachings of my church and its unspoken politics. That left an uncomfortable, echoing silence in our marriage, and I could no longer justify continuing to let it grow.

I broke—not from Christian faith, but from the evangelical expression of it. I found an Episcopal church where the rector is a woman and there are no restrictions on who can take Communion or become members. There are losses: the commitment to community, the ardent corporate singing, the heady sermonizing. But this new community has offered an uncomplicated place to reckon and reflect. We are, each one of us, messy constructions of life experience and context: Why did I chafe against limits in Ireland and love them in India? It doesn't make sense on the face of it, because we don't get to be simple, formulaic versions of ourselves. We all have relational restraints that can pull against other covenants. In this case, rightly or wrongly, faithfully or humanly, I feared the pull would lead to a snap.

Where, then, does this leave me? Where does it leave any of us, caught between the increasingly reductive forms of both faith and feminism on offer in this ideological era? Is integration the promise on the other side of full-throated surrender to things we don't understand, to beliefs we find anathema to our deepest convictions? In the years since I started down this path, it seems to have become only more treacherous, tangled by culture wars and bundled politics (with American Christianity throwing its weight around in both). Wouldn't it be wonderful if there were some healthier, broad containers that could hold the messy stacks of ourselves and yet still offer healing toward true north? Some place where we could line up all our disparate parts, take stock, and start to make sense of them together with all the other messy stacks of humans? If you find such a place, let me know.

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SUPPER QUESTIONS

The In-Between

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Anchor Question

Have your deeply held personal convictions ever conflicted with something your church or your faith more generally teaches or emphasizes? How do or did you go about deciding how to proceed?

Secondary Questions

1. What is the biggest, most important thing you've ever changed your mind about? Was it a surprise to you?
2. What do more traditional cultures like India have that more modernized, egalitarian cultures lack? And vice versa?
3. How do feminism and evangelicalism mix (or not)?