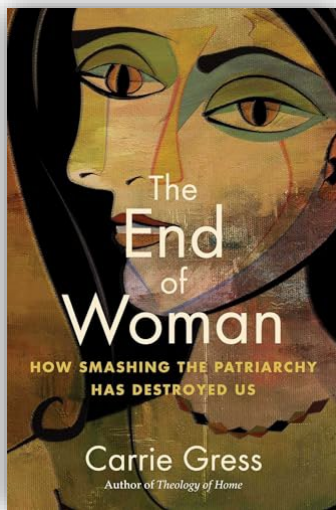


BOOK REVIEW

The End of Woman: How Smashing The Patriarchy Has Destroyed Us

By Carrie Gress

Reviewed by Diane Washburn



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The End of Woman: How Smashing The Patriarchy Has Destroyed Us, by Carrie Gress, a Catholic mother of five with a doctorate in philosophy, offers a rare examination of the historical ideologies that have shaped feminism and the ways those ideas have undermined the flourishing of women as women (xxi). Gress's book stands apart from most contemporary feminist scholarship by challenging its foundational assumptions, offering a counter-narrative that reframes the history of feminism through a critique of its ideological roots, and addressing a gap in the literature by drawing attention to the costs of a movement that has largely ignored women's actual problems and experiences, and turned womanhood into a costume, or role at best, as opposed to an embodied experience (xxiv). I did not expect to be shocked and horrified by a book about feminism; I was.

Gress situates her work squarely against the dominant currents of modern feminist theory, arguing—contrary to mainstream academic discourse—that true liberation for women cannot come from adopting masculine norms of autonomy and power, but from recovering an embodied, relational, and distinctly feminine experience that contemporary scholarship has largely abandoned. Building on this stance, she traces how modern feminism emerged from a flawed lineage of free-love radicals, Marxists, and women who rejected the constraints of family, faith, and embodied womanhood, ultimately teaching women that the only path to fulfillment was to imitate men (and, as she points out, often the worst kinds of men). Throughout the book, Gress contends that this movement has not elevated women but has dismantled the very concept of womanhood itself, leaving women more vulnerable, isolated, and detached from the maternal identity, spiritual frameworks, and relational forms of belonging that once gave their lives coherence and purpose, replacing them with a solitary, masculine ideal of autonomy. Her core argument is that women's flourishing depends not on becoming men, or erasing sexual difference, but on recovering a distinctly feminine account of human flourishing, exclusive to biological women, that modern Western culture has devalued: embracing motherhood.

Besides being well-researched and well-referenced, one of the book's greatest strengths is Gress's willingness to speak plainly about the darker side of the free-love tradition and its modern legacy. She pulls no punches when tracing how sexual "liberation" consistently produces unwanted children, unstable homes, and a cultural imagination that treats the unborn with shocking disregard. Her clarity here is refreshing, especially in a scholarly climate that often sanitizes these consequences or hides them behind euphemisms. Gress's directness is not sensationalist; it

is a moral argument grounded in the historical record, and it forces the reader to confront the human cost of ideologies that privilege autonomy over responsibility. In this way, the book's courage and clarity form its most compelling contribution.

The contrast she draws across history is particularly striking. Many women she profiles—women who lived centuries ago and would have been considered feminists in their own time—grieved the loss of their children with a depth that reveals a mother's enduring, formative love as well as the shared cultural understanding of the child's inherent worth (33-34). Today, by contrast, an embryo may be described as a "toxin thing" in a woman's womb, and the deliberate ending of an unborn life has been framed at times as an occasion for ironic celebration, complete with disturbing "dead-fetus" themed cupcakes (127, 91). Gress uses this contrast not for shock value but to expose how far the cultural logic of free love and radical autonomy has shifted our moral imagination, distancing women from their own bodies and from the instinct to love and protect the vulnerable lives entrusted to them.

Yet the book is not without limitations. One of the book's missing elements—which I see as both intentional and still worth critiquing—is its limited engagement with contemporary feminist scholarship. Gress's refusal to integrate modern feminist theory is part of her point: she believes the current academic consensus is misguided and therefore an unreliable partner in the conversation; I understand that she is pushing against the mainstream feminist ideology, which operates from a fundamentally different ontological perspective—one that cannot affirm the account of womanhood she proposes. But, by following only one genealogical thread—the radical, free-love, anti-religious lineage—she risks presenting this stream as if it were *the* feminist tradition. This leaves little room for the more moderate, reform-oriented feminist approaches that shaped women's suffrage, which were focused on legal equality rather than on dismantling the family or erasing embodied womanhood. Gress briefly acknowledges this difference, but the book doesn't fully develop how suffrage-era feminism diverged from the ideological radicals she critiques. As a result, the reader is left without a clear sense of how these competing visions interacted, overlapped, or diverged over time, which would have enriched the argument and sharpened the distinction she seeks to make between healthy reform and destructive ideology.

In addition, Gress often writes as if her reader is already informed in Christian doctrine. As a result, some parts of the book might not fully explain themselves. A secular reader may not grasp that, from a Christian perspective, early feminist reworkings of Eve and the serpent are not neutral symbols but profoundly distorted and troubling retellings (28, 46, 52). Her argument remains compelling, but the way some points are presented may confuse a reader who lacks the same theological background.

Even so, Gress's work resonates deeply with a Christian, faith-infused approach to understanding human experience because she refuses to treat culture, gender, and embodiment as value-neutral. Her critique of free love, her attention to the moral imagination surrounding unborn life, and her insistence that women are created with purpose and relational meaning all point toward a teleological account of personhood—one grounded in divine design rather than self-invention. By exposing the spiritual and cultural forces that shape women's lives, she demonstrates how theological insight can illuminate patterns of human flourishing and human harm that secular frameworks often overlook. In this way, the book opens space for a distinctly faith-shaped anthropology, one that takes seriously the realities of embodiment, moral responsibility, and the hope that redemption offers to human communities; we are not stuck here, as sin and suffering do not have the final word. Yet, there is room for secular readers to engage its reflections on culture, embodiment, and human purpose, even if they approach these questions from a different starting point.

In the end, this book is a jagged "red pill"—unpleasant to swallow, sharp in its moral clarity, and impossible to ignore once taken. Like the moment in *The Matrix* when waking up shatters the illusion, Gress forces the reader to see the cultural narratives around womanhood for what they are, not what we have been conditioned to believe. The shock of this awakening was reinforced as I recognized how closely my internal narratives follow the patterns and values outlined for American women by early communist thinkers. The revelations presented are uncomfortable, disorienting, and at times painful, but also necessary. By exposing the human cost of ideologies that promise liberation while dismantling the very structures that allow women to flourish, Gress offers, not an easy read, but an honest one—and its very discomfort is what makes it so urgent.



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