LAUREN BENTLEY
Trinity Western University

"I Don't Know What to Do with It"

Gender, Religion, and Affective Excess in Fleabag

ABSTRACT In season 2, episode 4 of the critically acclaimed British television series *Fleabag*, the eponymous main character speaks to her best friend, Boo, in a flashback following Fleabag's mother's funeral. "I don't know what to do with it," Fleabag tells Boo. "All the love I have for her." Here, Fleabag demonstrates what I refer to as *affective excess*—an overwhelming emotional response that feels too much for an individual to bear alone. In this case, Fleabag feels too much love for her mother but has no mother to receive it. Boo responds in her typical, guileless way: "I'll take it. No, I'm serious. It sounds lovely." The series implies that Fleabag channeled her love for her mother, and the grief accompanying her death, into her relationship with Boo. However, after Boo also dies, the viewer is introduced to one of the show's central questions: Where can one place their affective excess when the usual channels are no longer available? The show explores how the intersecting demands on Fleabag—as both a feminist and a neoliberal postfeminist agent—leave her without an adequate outlet for unburdening her excess grief and guilt, ultimately rendering healing and relief impossible. Despite her avowed atheism, Fleabag appears to eventually find relief through spiritual means, specifically confession. This article argues that while *Fleabag* offers a powerful feminist critique of neoliberal society, it also presents an implicit reflection of the limits of feminism and advocates for a transcendent element in human relationships as the only adequate place to unburden affective excess. KEYWORDS Confession, feminism, Fleabag, postfeminism, religion

INTRODUCTION

Fleabag aired over two seasons, each consisting of six episodes, in 2016 and 2019. Created by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, who also stars as the unnamed protagonist, the show follows the character's daily life in London as she deals (often poorly) with grief stemming from her mother's death from breast cancer three years before the series begins, and the later death of her best friend, Boo, who accidentally killed herself by stepping into a bike lane. Fleabag is also weighed down by guilt for betraying Boo by sleeping with Boo's boyfriend. *Fleabag* is a decidedly feminist show; however, it is not merely a straightforward critique of patriarchal society. Throughout the series, Fleabag struggles to find effective ways to process her grief and guilt. The show asks: How can autonomous subjects find relief from the pain caused by affective excess? The answers she encounters—from both traditional feminist models of immanent divinity and postfeminist neoliberalism—prove inadequate, as neither offer sufficient spaces to endure the unbearable weight of her own autonomy. In response, Fleabag subverts her sisterhood and does something unexpected to find answers: She goes to church.

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While many scholars have analyzed *Fleabag*'s feminism, the show's unique exploration of the intersection between feminism and religion remains unexamined. This article addresses this gap by looking at how the series situates itself in an uneasy relationship with traditional feminist models of transcendence while simultaneously rejecting patriarchal norms and questioning neoliberal agency. It further demonstrates that this ambivalent position gives the protagonist, Fleabag, the leeway to subversively engage with the offerings of patriarchal religion—particularly confession—as a means of relief. As a post-religious neoliberal subject and an anxious but committed feminist, Fleabag articulates contemporary women's desire for transcendent spaces beyond the self to address their deep spiritual yearnings.

FEMINISM AND RELIGION: AN UNEASY COMMUNION

Fleabag's daring storytelling at the crossroads of gender and religion is a unique example of how television—as a widely accessible mode of cultural storytelling—has become a platform for exploring contemporary culture's pressing questions about sociopolitical forces and the individual suffering, grief, and interpersonal heartaches that shape our lives. The 2009 book *Small Screen, Big Picture*, about the nexus of television and religion, posits that television has emerged as a medium that mediates religious experiences for believers and nonbelievers alike, making it an ideal space to bring together questions of social, political, and religious identities that continue to shape contemporary life, despite the decline of religion as a dominant foundation for cultural norms. Television, the book asserts, is a place "for creating cultural identity as well as for the 'religious' tasks of meaning making, reenchantment, and ritualization" (Winston 2009, 2). Many contemporary, high-quality programs, like *Fleabag*, are now moving beyond the bland happy endings of previous generations to grapple with "questions of meaning, identity, and community" (Winston 2013, 155–6). Yet, as media and religion scholar Mia Lövheim notes, the intersection of religion and gender on TV remains underexplored (2013, 2).

Perhaps this should not be surprising. Although gender is a natural "nexus for conversation" when interrogating religion (Winston 2009, 2), media scholars must face an entrenched mistrust between scholars of feminism and religion. Nancy Frankenberry observes: "Feminist scholarship in general has had a hard time with religion. And mainstream philosophy of religion until recently has had a hard time with feminist scholarship" (2018). At the crux of this antagonism is religion's endemic misogyny and androcentrism, as perceived by many feminist religious philosophers—the same societal norms that *Fleabag* critiques extensively. Religion, particularly in the Western and (post)Christian milieu in which *Fleabag* takes place, is rooted in "a male tradition of production and transmission, with a history of excluding and devaluing women," and is "defined by many concepts and symbols marked as 'masculine'" (Frankenberry 2018).[1] Feminist critiques often center on the problem of a male God: an absolutized form of elevated masculinity that permanently otherizes and oppresses women. Influential American feminist philosopher Mary Daly epitomizes this view when she writes

1. While Fleabag operates within a broadly Christian and specifically post-Christian perspective, the works of other feminists, such as Rita M. Gross, point to ways in which other religious worldviews might add new layers and insights to media exploring the intersection of feminism and religion (see, e.g., Gross 2009).

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that the image of God "the father" sustains and validates patriarchy as the natural order (1973, 13). This masculine image of God not only oppresses women but also models and upholds other forms of violence and dehumanization, rendering the otherizing of women into something like the original sin. Yet Daly recognizes that pure secularism cannot resolve religion's dependence on male symbols—a notable challenge for Fleabag, who lives in highly secular, post-Christian London—as secularism fails to address the deep longing and desire for transformation at the heart of women's liberation. Feminism, for Daly, must instead be "not only many-faceted but cosmic and ultimately religious in its vision" (1973, 29; 2017, 59).

Some feminist religious philosophers, recognizing the need to honor the religious desire for transcendence as integral to female liberation, focus on reforming the androcentric language of faith to be more inclusive of women's experience. Another, often complementary, approach is to redefine divinity itself as immanent, emerging from a woman's subjectivity. In *Beyond God the Father*, Daly re-envisions God not as a static, intrinsically othered noun but as a verb—a dynamic process of becoming (1973, 32–33). This divine process lies within the creative potential and awakening of a women's self, a process Daly refers to as the "image of God" (1973, 29). In Europe, French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray reimagined "becoming divine" as a creative response to post-structural critiques that dismantled the very notion of religious belief. Irigaray proposed the "sensible transcendental," an enduring concept that rejects an external transcendent being in favor of an immanent divinity (Irigaray [1984] 1993, 129; see also Keller 2003, 70). Frankenberry notes that this idea of transcendence emerging from within continues in Irigaray's later work, where "Irigaray's approach to the topic of divinity is profoundly immanentalizing," elevating woman herself to the status of the divine (2018). While Irigaray's sensible transcendental avoids individualism by framing transcendence as arising from the encounter between two human beings, Mary Keller argues that Irigaray's perspective of the divine is still foundationally rooted in Western models of autonomy and individual subjectivity (Keller 2003).

While Daly's and Irigaray's models of the divine have been subject to many thoughtful critiques within feminist religious philosophy, most Western women, like Fleabag, inhabit a post-religious universe that emphasizes the self as the site for hope and healing. This belief finds its most extreme expression in postfeminism, which rejects the political ramifications of feminism proper. Emerging in the late twentieth century, postfeminism considers women as self-realizing, autonomous subjects capable of self-actualization through consumerism. It aligns solidly with the neoliberal ideal that emphasizes "individualism, choice, and agency" (Gill 2016, 613; see also Banet-Weiser 2018, 153–4; Holzberg and Lehtonen 2021, 10–12; and Hill 2021, 4–5). Though postfeminists may have left behind many of the nobler ideals of twentieth-century feminist religious philosophers, their focus on autonomous self-actualization—albeit through capitalist rituals—grows out of a ground seeded by models of the immanent divine.

GOOD FEMINIST, BAD FEMINIST

Fleabag, like many contemporary women navigating the postfeminist landscape, is an atheist who challenges traditional expectations of what makes a "good woman." In the classic Madonna/whore religious dichotomy imposed on women (Winston 2013, 158), Fleabag

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would align with the latter, directly challenging gender expectations and norms. As Holzberg and Lehtonen observe: "[She] is crass and un-ladylike, sceptical [sic] of romance and affection, and instead indulges in casual sex with many different men and relishes in biting irony and grinding self-doubt" (2021, 3). However, in her post-religious world, the Madonna/whore continuum has been supplanted by a spectrum of "good feminist" versus "bad feminist." Feminist identity thus becomes the moral framework from which "something more" is sought. Media scholar Diane Winston, drawing on feminist scholar Tania Modleski's influential *Loving with a Vengeance*, defines this "something more" as the desire for community, transcendence, and female autonomy (Winston 2013, 155–6). In Fleabag's case, this search for "something more" is expressed as her yearning for a person or place to relieve the burden of her affective excess, as she struggles on each point of Winston's rubric. Two foundational women in her community—her mother and her best friend—are dead and can no longer hold space for her affective excess. As an atheist, she remains skeptical of transcendence throughout the series, even after she falls in love with a priest. And her autonomy is fragile at best [2]: though she owns a café, she is financially precarious, desperately needing a bank loan to keep it afloat (Holzberg and Lehtonen 2021, 2; Woods 2019, 196). Further, while Fleabag conforms to societal beauty norms as a slim and attractive white woman, she is anxious about how long this "social currency" will last. She remarks in season 1, episode 6: "I know that my body, as it is now, really is the only thing I have left, and when that gets old and unfuckable I may as well just kill it." Even her sexual agency—expressed through meaningless, disengaged sex with men she can barely tolerate—is more a pathological response to grief and less an empowered assertion of female desire. This same sexual agency is a key factor in her betrayal of Boo, compounding her affective excess of grief and guilt throughout the series. Ultimately, the feminist and postfeminist models available to Fleabag for coping with her profound pain and fragile agency prove inadequate.

Fleabag is open about her uneasy relationship with feminism. In season 1, episode 1, for instance, she and her sister, Claire, attend a feminist lecture. During the presentation, the commanding speaker—a prototypical "woman in a business suit"—asks the audience: "So I pose the question to the women in this room today. Please raise your hand if you would trade five years of your life for the so-called perfect body." Fleabag and Claire immediately raise their hands, the only ones in the auditorium to do so. After guiltily lowering their hands, Fleabag leans over and whispers to Claire: "We are bad feminists." This self-description as a bad feminist has drawn comparisons to Roxane Gay's essay collection *Bad Feminist*, which brought the idea into popular culture in 2014 (see Ashton 2019; Simmons 2020). Gay writes: "I embrace the label of bad feminist because I am human. I am messy. I'm not trying to be an example. I'm not trying to be perfect. I am not trying to say I have all the answers" ([2014] 2017, xiii). Despite the many parallels and similar emphasis on imperfection, Gay's popular (and in many ways refreshing)

2. Holzberg and Lehtonen (2021) also point out that, although Fleabag is "precarious" (referencing Rebecca Wanzo's term [2016]), she is also a middle-class, traditionally attractive white woman whose family is obviously well-off, meaning her precariousness is more emotional than financial or social (7). While this is a useful distinction, it is worth noting that throughout season 1, Fleabag's family regularly evades giving her financial support, even when they have the means to help her, despite clear signs that her business is failing.

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feminist perspective ultimately diverges from Fleabag's. Gay finds in feminism a grounding, life-directing purpose that Fleabag cannot. "Feminism has given me peace. Feminism has given me guiding principles for how I write, how I read, how I live," Gay explains. Feminism has given her a place from which to "want more, do better" (xv). Even as a self-proclaimed bad feminist, Gay sees in feminism a framework for a meaningful and purpose-filled life, akin to the role of religious narratives in the past.

Instead of providing meaning and purpose, Fleabag's bad feminism stresses her out. At the end of season 1, episode 1, she shows up outside her father's house, drunk and in denial, insisting she's "absolutely fine." In reality, she has just stolen money from a date she despises and attempted to take an inebriated girl home with her. Standing on her dad's doorstep, she recalls a past moment with Boo. In the flashback, they sit in their co-owned café, experiencing an intimate connection rooted in their shared endeavor. After singing together, "We're so happy to be modern women!" Boo declares, "Let's never ask anyone for anything. They don't get it." Fleabag agrees. Yet back in the present, as she stands outside her father's house, the audience understands that the loss of her close friendship with Boo is a profound source of her misery—one that transcends the material realm. Boo was a vessel for Fleabag's affective excess, and now she is gone. Fleabag says to her dad: "I have a horrible feeling I am a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, mannish-looking woman who can't even call herself a feminist." He responds drolly, "You get all of that from your mother." Fleabag's utter desperation, brought on by her questionable decisions that night and the haunting memory of her intimacy with Boo, culminates in fear that she is not even qualified to call herself a feminist.

Holzberg and Lehtonen (2021) characterize Fleabag's complex portrayal of feminism in part as an "anxious desire for feminism [which] is marked by an ongoing sense of shame and guilt" (11). Building on their terminology and their astute observation of the guilt and shame that tinges Fleabag's feminism, I propose that Fleabag is best described not as a bad feminist but as an anxious one. Holzberg and Lehtonen suggest this anxiety comes from the show falling prey to the "heteropessimist paradox" (11); however, I contend that a more holistic interpretation of Fleabag's emotional life must acknowledge that the guilt that colors her feminism and provokes her anxiety stems from her unrecognized need for a place to release the excesses of her affective life—her love, her guilt, and her grief. Even life-affirming bad feminism cannot compensate for the losses of her closest friend and her beloved mother.

The notion that it is possible to be a good "bad feminist" while bearing the affective excesses of life alone is again intentionally challenged by *Fleabag* at the beginning of season 2, episode 1, when the show parodies the "makeover paradigm,"[3] a hallmark of postfeminism (Gill 2016, 613). As noted previously, Fleabag's relationship to her own agency is portrayed as complicated and insecure throughout the series. As season 2 opens, however, Fleabag is at a fancy dinner with her family, her first reunion with them since her sister confronted

3. Sarah Hill (2021), in her analysis of how young women are viewed in contemporary British film, notes that British media tend to display "ambivalence to the postfeminist makeover" (5). Fleabag seems to share this ambivalence, regularly satirizing the idea; however, the pressures of conforming to the female makeover ideal clearly affect Fleabag as well. See, for example, Claire's haircut scene in season 2, episode 5, which includes an impassioned speech that ends with the statement, "Hair is everything!"

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her about her betrayal of Boo over a year ago. She reports that she is doing well and then flashes back through a makeover montage: eating healthily, reviving her café, exercising, and abstaining from meaningless, compulsive sex. Yet, as the season unfolds, it becomes clear that these surface-level improvements have not alleviated her underlying guilt or grief. This inner turmoil is made obvious in the scene preceding the montage (though it occurs later in the show's timeline). In the washroom of the same posh restaurant, Fleabag tends to her bleeding nose while looking in the mirror. Turning to the audience, she deadpans: "This is a love story." Alone and bleeding, Fleabag's only confidant remains the detached audience. Despite her outward success brought on by her self-improvement efforts, the bloody nose punctuating her love story symbolizes an unhealed wound that still hinders her ability to form intimate relationships.

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CONFESSION AS RELIEF

Fleabag is neither a successful self-actualizing postfeminist nor a teleologically oriented bad feminist. Despite living in a world that hyperemphasizes female autonomy, her yearning for "something more" and her anxious relationship to feminism lead her to make a daring and ironic move that flies in the face of her feminist forebears: falling in love with the male deity—or, more precisely, with his representative, an unnamed Catholic priest she addresses only as "father." This intimacy with a patriarchal figure reveals how feminisms—traditional, bad, and post—while vitally important, fall short in fulfilling women's yearning for a transcendent place beyond the self to bear affective excess. This is particularly seen in Fleabag's many thematic confessions, where she repeatedly expresses her desire to unburden herself, especially of her own autonomy.

Traditionally, confession is viewed as the "Sacrament of Reconciliation," an act that leads to absolution from a transcendent being, God, via a priest who serves as God's emissary. Christians believe that confession has the power to lead to "incredible feelings of peace, joy, relief, and love," all of which Fleabag desperately craves (Catholics Come Home n.d.). However, confession entails a submission of the self to an external entity for absolution—an admission of one's inability to "save" oneself. This notion is inconsistent with both neoliberal atomization and the idea that the divine emerges from within. Fleabag's frequent "breaking of the fourth wall"—a theatrical term referring to moments when a character directly acknowledges or addresses the audience by speaking to or looking at them, temporarily breaching the imaginary wall between the fictional world and the viewers—alludes to the practice of confession. Critic Faye Woods (2019), in her analysis of the comic effect of the broken fourth wall, likens this habit of direct address to confession: "Fleabag's abject confessions signal her direct address as transparent, in contrast to the unstable performance of controlled upper middle-class femininity she presents to others" (206). When Fleabag breaks the fourth wall, the audience bears witness to her inner life—a life completely cut off from meaningful connections with others because of her guilt and grief.[4] Yet viewers are

4. The broken fourth wall also gives *Fleabag* the texture of autobiography. While *Fleabag* is not Phoebe Waller-Bridge's autobiography (Simmons 2020, 35), the intimacy created by the broken fourth wall allows the series to function as Fleabag's autobiography, giving her a voice to tell (or at least comment on) her own story. In this regard, it is worth

also aware that, because our relationship with her is mediated through the screen, we are not adequate recipients of her guilt and grief.

Fleabag's first overt confession occurs in season 1, episode 1, when she tells her father, "I can't even call myself a feminist." Unfortunately, her father—who struggles to articulate his thoughts throughout the series—lacks the emotional capacity to accept her unburdening. Later, in episode 4, confession reappears when a bank manager, attempting to reform his sexist ways, shares his guilt with Fleabag. During his confession, Fleabag remains silent, as she is attending a silent retreat. Yet, her silence creates space for her to receive the troubled man's unburdening without judgment, a foreshadowing of the pivotal role confession will play for Fleabag as the series unfolds.[5] Finally, at the end of season 1, after her betrayal of Boo has been revealed to the viewers, Fleabag makes her own confession to the bank manager. In a typically subversive move for the series, the manager—a straight, white, male arch-capitalist—is perhaps the least likely person from whom a contemporary woman would seek absolution. Sitting across from him in her failing café, she admits:

> I fucked up my family....And I fucked my friend by fucking her boyfriend. And sometimes I wish I didn't even know that fucking existed. And I know that my body, as it is now, really is the only thing I have left, and when that gets old and unfuckable I may as well just kill it. And somehow there isn't anything worse...than someone who doesn't want to fuck me....You know, everyone feels like this a little bit, and they're just not talking about it, or I'm completely fucking alone...which isn't fucking funny.

The bank manager replies with unexpected grace, saying "Everyone makes mistakes," and then offers her penance in the form of a bank loan. Following Fleabag's dark descent into her pain in season 1, this confession hints at the possibility of hope despite her distress and reveals her yearning for new spaces where her unburdening would be accepted.

The series' climatic confession scene in season 2, episode 4, marks Fleabag's ultimate rejection of neoliberal expectations and her subversive desire for, of all things, submission as a possible means of alleviating the burden of her own self. In this scene, Fleabag enters a confessional booth with the priest, whom she loves, sitting on the other side—a surprising development that follows the unfolding account of their deepening intimacy in the second season. Fleabag, who until this point has engaged in detached, meaningless sex with men she cannot stand, spends the entire season titillated by a man she cannot have. At the start of the episode, the priest visits Fleabag at her café. During their conversation, she breaks the fourth wall, and he asks "What was that?" and "Where did you just go?", noticing when she "leaves" to speak to the audience. Further in the scene, when Fleabag again addresses

noting Mary Evans's (2013) view of autobiography as a feminist mode. She observes that the form has often been used by women to "set out the complexities of moral choice and moral action" and to uncover "the hidden lives of women" (38). She adds that "the salutary importance of autobiography is that it acts as a bulwark against the over-socialised account of human beings" (39). Fleabag's use of the confessional, autobiographical mode of direct address supports the idea that her individual grief and pain cannot always find adequate relief within her sociopolitical moral universe.

5. This is all the more interesting as Fleabag's silence throughout the episode also functions as a feminist critique: The women at the silent retreat are instructed not to speak as they perform menial household tasks, lock their thoughts in a "thought prison," and contemplate "why they are here," implicating how society compels women to question their right to be wherever they are. Her silence serves as an ironic feminist commentary on how women's voices often go unheard, while simultaneously creating the intimate space necessary for confession.

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the viewer, the priest breaks the fourth wall with her—a key moment that suggests their growing intimacy and his ability to break through her defenses and enter her private confessional space. Later that evening, Fleabag visits the priest's church and attempts to pray. Despite her explicit rejection of the idea of God earlier (season 2, episode 1), she continues to long for something greater to help assuage her affective life. Her prayers are interrupted by loud music played by the priest, unaware of her presence. When she finds him, he asks: "What were you praying about?" Fleabag shrugs, unable to articulate the full weight of her emotional distress. "You don't like answering questions, do you?" the priest observes as he invites her into the confessional booth.

In the booth, Fleabag is hidden from outside eyes; her body is no longer watched, and she is liberated from the need to judge her ability or inability to "call herself a feminist," manage her affairs well, or make herself over through sheer force of will. The lack of face-to-face communication functions similarly to a psychoanalyst's couch or a free-flowing conversation during a long drive: It removes the burden of the gaze of the other, allowing greater honesty and freedom in expressing inner realities. In this sacred space, the priest—acting as representative of the male divine—offers a place for Fleabag to deposit her immense pain, echoing her earlier yearning to unburden the extra love she felt for her mother to Boo after her mother's death.[6] The confessional becomes a haven where she can finally set aside anxieties and free her conscience. Sitting in the darkened booth, Fleabag lists her various tawdry sins, notably without breaking the fourth wall to make eye contact with the viewer. She is no longer reliant on the audience as her confessional outlet but is closer than ever to speaking honestly to a "real" other: the priest, and, indirectly, God. Finally, she gets to the heart of her deepest longing:

> I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat, what to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, and who to love, and how to…tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I've been getting it wrong.

At the end of her confession, Fleabag appeals to the priest: "Just tell me what to do, Father." This confession directly connects her need to off-load her grief and guilt with the concurrent weight of expectations placed on her as a neoliberal woman. Her plea also complicates her feminist identity by invoking traditional patriarchal religious practice as a potential path to relief.

Further complicating matters, upon hearing Fleabag's confession, the priest tells her to kneel—but instead of offering absolution, he succumbs to their undeniable chemistry and kisses her. This moment raises questions about how the priest could be seen as violating Fleabag's spiritual autonomy, especially given her confession of a desire for submission. Rather than honoring her spiritual openness, which he has elicited by virtue of his position as a priest, he takes advantage of her vulnerability. In doing so, the show subtly critiques the ways men exert their power over women, particularly in relation to the body. As the priest and Fleabag embrace, a large painting falls to the ground, interrupting their intimacy. The

6. "I don't know what to do with it, all the love I have for her."

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priest immediately leaves, reminded of his vows and the obligations they impose. The falling painting is depicted as a "sign from God"—another example of the show's bold curiosity about the divine from a post-religious standpoint. This is the second such sign in the series. The first occurs in season 2, episode 1, when Fleabag declares, "Well I don't believe in God." Immediately after, a painting in the church drops to the ground, to which the priest responds, "I love it when He does that." Earlier in the same episode, Fleabag visits the priest's church to try to woo him. The camera, echoing Fleabag's gaze, lingers on images of supplicants kneeling before Christ, reflecting the show's interest in divine intervention as a force external to the self. In addition, throughout season 2, a fox follows the priest around—a mysterious symbol perhaps representing his troubled past or a sly, indefatigable God pursuing him as he wrestles with his persistent temptation to direct his love elsewhere. The painting's fall after the kiss ties these recurring hints of a transcendent reality directly to Fleabag's confession. This suggests her genuine yearning for a transcendent space to unburden herself—a space that, for centuries, has been most readily accessible through the mediation of formal religion.

At the same time, the priest's kiss becomes an obvious impediment to Fleabag receiving patriarchal absolution, reaffirming the show's feminist impulse by rejecting the necessity of a mediated, androcentric path to joy, relief, and love. This rejection is reinforced in the final episode of season 2, which situates the Catholic wedding of Fleabag's father and soon-to-be evil stepmother[7] in a garden rather than a church. During the ceremony, the priest delivers a homily on love: "Love is awful!" he declares—a particularly poignant statement, as it is clear that he and Fleabag are deeply in love. The depth of their connection is revealed the night before the wedding, when Fleabag and the priest finally have sex. Throughout the series, the many sex scenes are portrayed with flat crassness, accompanied by Fleabag's detached commentary to the audience, which "entangles us in her sexual abjection" (Woods 2019, 206). In contrast, the scene with the priest is brief—just long enough to show that the act is more than ironic self-debasement—before Fleabag reaches out and pushes the camera lens away. What the priest and Fleabag share is not meant for detached commentary or observation: it is real intimacy, made possible by her earlier confession.

The genuine connection between the priest and Fleabag adds texture to his speech, which continues: "[Love is] painful....It's all any of us want, and it's hell when we get there. So no wonder it's something we don't want to do on our own." He then delivers the key phrase: "I was taught if we're born with love, *then life is about choosing the right place to put it*" (emphasis mine). A full life, the priest assures, is about finding "the right place" to put our love(s)—and, as shown by *Fleabag*, finding the right place to put our guilts, our griefs, and our other affective excesses. The priest continues: "It takes strength to know what's right. Love isn't something weak people do. Being a romantic takes a hell of a lot of hope. I think what they mean is, when you find somebody that you love, it feels like hope." This hope, however, is something Fleabag has been unable to find within her post-religious moral universe, which has added

7. The show plays with feminist stereotypes while still offering feminist critique, as evident in its prominent portrayal of two inversions of female archetypes: the Godmother, who eventually becomes an Evil Stepmother—an earthy, vain, and manipulative artist who embodies "an earlier version of liberation feminism" (Holzberg and Lehtonen 2021, 10); and Fleabag's sister Claire, a "bitter and heartless...archetypical neoliberal feminist who prides herself on 'having it all,'" standing in contrast to Fleabag's "messy and uncontrolled but definitely more fun existence" (4).

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pressure to her life instead of offering relief. In this way, *Fleabag* critiques both the idea of an immanent divine and neoliberal autonomy by exploring the deep yearning that remains within many women for a transcendent space capable of bearing their affective excesses.

For the priest, this transcendent other is found in the traditional male divine—something he affirms when, at the end of the series, he tells Fleabag that he has chosen his love for God over his love for her. However, Fleabag ultimately affirms that "joy, relief, and love" do not require a formal Father to offer absolution. Despite the priest's rejection, in the series' final moments, she walks away from the audience's gaze as the song in the background declares, "She knows she's going to be alright."

CONCLUSION

While remaining true to its prominent critique of patriarchy, the show suggests that Fleabag's exploration of traditional religious paths has offered her insight into the possibility of a life beyond the autonomous self: an unmediated intimacy, like the one she shares with the priest, that creates a space for placing her affective excess and becoming unburdened.[8] This concept is not foreign to feminist discourse; indeed, Fleabag and the priest's relationship evokes Irigaray's sensible transcendental, where transcendence emerges through human connection. Yet, it is Fleabag's subversive openness to "go to church" and engage in confession that finally enables her to reimagine what it means to seek "something more" as a woman in a post-religious, hyperautonomous moral universe. Through this journey, *Fleabag* offers viewers a nuanced contemporary view of both gender and faith.[9] ■

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8. It is worth noting that the priest's awareness of this type of love stems from his relationship with the divine. Throughout the season, it becomes clear that he comes from a broken family and finds in the church (and in God) a transcendent place to unburden his pain. This is the form of love he gives Fleabag: a love that provides her a place to then unburden her guilt and grief.

9. In critiquing the legacy of autonomy that Fleabag and other contemporary women have inherited from various feminisms, Fleabag is far from alone. The show participates in an already established critique advanced by, for example, contemporary womanists who opine that feminism has lost its luster precisely due to its lack of emphasis on relationality. For an example of a nonacademic womanist argument against feminism, see Xochitl Gonzalez's "Parity with Men is No Longer Enough" (2022). Also, see Keller's postcolonial critique of Irigaray, contending that Irigaray is too entrenched in Western empiricism and autonomy to represent the religious experiences of non-Western women; Keller provides the example of Nehanda, a possessed spiritual leader in Zimbabwe whose self, or individual identity, is completely cast aside to allow the deity to inhabit her body (2003).

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