In the fourth century a prolonged and painful debate took place to establish the contours of the doctrine of the Trinity. In this debate all hierarchical ordering in the Trinity was rejected. It was agreed that Father, Son and Holy Spirit were one in being and act. Surprisingly, across the centuries, time and time again, subordinationist teaching has reappeared. In our own time the argument that the Son is subordinated to the Father has re-emerged in conservative evangelical circles as an argument to justify the ongoing subordination of women.

In this book Kevin Giles first documents the contemporary conservative evangelical arguments for the eternal subordination of the Son and then refutes them by appeal to the historical sources and the best of recent thinking on the Trinity.

What Giles does is charged with passion and polemic. He applies his fundamentally egalitarian model in a powerful refutation of the subordinationist thinking of some of his fellow evangelical Anglicans. Giles’s particular target is the trinitarian argument for subordinating women to the ‘headship’ of men. Giles has read his opponents closely, and his attack on the hierarchical model of the Trinity in its various forms is not to be lightly dismissed. He notes that in this literature the term ‘difference’ is a code word for inequality, and the term ‘equality’ is assumed to mean sameness. The very point of the trinitarian doctrine of God, as Giles correctly shows, is that real difference and real equality can go together, and to confuse equality with sameness (or difference with inequality) are category mistakes.

In the second half of the book Giles evaluates the other arguments used by contemporary conservative evangelicals to subordinate women and finds them both novel and unconvincing. Advocates of gender subordination (including those who propose the innocent-sounding ‘difference of roles’ theory) are demonstrated to be just as selective in their readings of the biblical texts and the tradition—and on the basis of considerably less evidence—as were the nineteenth-century advocates of racial subordination that justified slavery. Giles’s historical work on slavery is alarming: it shows how good Christians, with the best of intentions, can misinterpret the Bible to serve their own ends.

Giles offers three valuable methodological rules for formulating a theology of gender equality: one based in the differentiated equality expressed in Genesis 1:26–28; a second in the priority of an eschatological perspective over any ‘orders of creation’ theology; and a third rule, based on the relationships seen in the co-equal Trinity, for interpreting the texts that tend to be cited in the gender debate (202–3, 268).
A common theme in the recent upsurge in scholarly and popular discussions of the Trinity is the level of agreement about the practicality of the trinitarian approach to God. If even twenty years ago one might have heard the Trinity dismissed as having no implications for real everyday life, this opinion itself now sounds quaintly old-fashioned. The Trinity has returned to being—in reality, not just in theory—one of the central non-negotiables for Christians. So it is hardly surprising that, given the wide diversity of opinions among Christians as to how real, practical Christian life is to be lived, it has now, again, become a matter of some consequence what sort of trinitarian God one professes. Here a particular version of the Trinity is forcefully advocated and another version just as forcefully refuted, and both in relation to an immensely practical ethical question, that of hegemony and subordination—more specifically, the hegemony of one gender and the subordination of the other. Giles’s passionate advocacy of the historic orthodox position thus finds concrete expression in opposing the tendency he notes in some of his fellow evangelicals, the tendency to subordinate women on the basis of a supposedly hierarchical ordering of persons within the Trinity.

Kevin Giles’s book is indispensable reading for anyone with an interest in the Trinity or the contemporary gender debate, especially within Australian Anglicanism. Giles’s careful scholarship never obscures either the urgency of the message or his clarity of purpose and sense of mission. And if anyone ever thought theology dry or abstract, read this book and think again!