

BONDING, THE CRITICAL PRAXIS OF FEMINISM

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THE SEARCH for authenticity in relationship is at the heart of the experience of life. It is not surprising then, that a growing number of people, many of them women, have been deeply drawn into justice and peace questions. For at the heart of justice and peace is the question of quality of relationship—relationships existing not only in our own personal sphere of involvement, but also existing, for example, between first world and third world, rich and poor, white and black, woman and man. Is it not quality of relationship which serves in the final analysis to promote the dignity of every human person? Is it not this factor which has been identified as the reason for all the Church's work in justice and peace?¹

Involvement in justice and peace requires, then, that attention be paid to the way that personal, interpersonal and structural dynamics determine relations. Underlying these very determining factors, however, is to be found a network of common meaning and values, a collection of myths, symbols and shared treasures of human hearts, or, in a word, culture.²

The world community today is living in the grip of a culture which has shaped us into a civilization whose people are at war within themselves, with their neighbours near and far, and with the earth itself. There is a growing consensus that as a civilization we stand in critical need of understanding what has brought us to this point in order that we may find a way to refashion our personal, interpersonal and societal relationships and so respond to the deepest challenge of the gospel.

It is the intention of this article to suggest that bonding, as the critical praxis of feminism, can and does serve as a radical vehicle toward the evangelization of our dominant cultural pattern of relating. As such, feminist bonding holds enormous potential in pursuit of that more perfect form of justice among men and women

called for by Paul VI in *The development of peoples*. In order to establish the above, it will be necessary to uncover the fundamental values of patriarchal culture, and demonstrate the world view and quality of relationship vis-à-vis other human beings and God which these values produce. The alternative world view of feminism with its way of relating to others and God will then be explored. In this context, the radical nature of feminist bonding and its unique contribution to the creation of a just and hence peaceful world will hopefully become fully evident.

Patriarchy—the existing world order

According to the thinking of many, western civilization, over the course of the last two thousand years, has created a specific kind of culture which has been described as *patriarchal*. To describe patriarchy as a way of life which is characterized by male domination of women and all that is considered female³ is to articulate the end point of a long and continuing process. If one wishes really to understand patriarchy, it is necessary to understand the two fundamental values which are central to this system of belief. The organizing values of patriarchy are separation and division.⁴ Spirit is separate from matter, rationality is separate from intuition, objectivity is separate from affectivity, assertiveness is separate from passivity, and order is separate from chaos.⁵ In an attempt to order experience, patriarchy functions by dividing that which is different. Precisely because patriarchy uses separation and division in pursuit of order it becomes necessary to make some judgment as to the comparative worth of these realities, in other words, to introduce a hierarchical ordering of things. Superiority and inferiority are thus introduced into the patriarchal value system. The criteria by which such judgments are rendered are themselves worthy of note in as much as they constitute a further elaboration of the patriarchal value system. Realities which qualify for the 'superior' position are those governed by the clear, logical progression of thought, those able to be predicted and controlled, those, in the final analysis, which are similar to the mode of operation of the one rendering judgment. Body, intuition, affectivity, passivity and chaos all become identified with female, and are thus considered to be inferior. Hence, the patriarchal value system separates different aspects of reality and then makes the critical decision that certain differing aspects of any given reality render it of lesser worth. Such a manner of thinking chooses to

deal with the reality of differences through determining that different and deficient are synonymous. This view moves beyond the intra-psychic functions mentioned above and extends to people of different races, different classes and different nations. The naming of women and all that is considered female as inferior becomes a prototype in the naming of different races, classes and nations as inferior. A further elaboration of patriarchal thinking is to be found in the belief that all members of creation exist separately from each other as autonomous creatures apart from nature and their environment and in competition with all other living things for the fulfilment of basic needs and desires.⁶ All that is not the masculine self becomes at least the stranger to be feared and at worst the enemy to be conquered. The mind-set produced by the fundamental values of patriarchy, namely 1) all but the self (and only the masculine self) is other, stranger and/or enemy, and 2) all that is different from the self (and only the masculine self) is deficient, creates a belief system that makes domination a prerequisite for survival. The stranger is feared and needs to be controlled for one's own safety, the deficient are unfortunate and need to be controlled for their own safety, and ultimately for the good of the wider society. Thus, the children of patriarchy are militarism, imperialism, racism, classism as well as sexism. The patriarchal way of thinking described above was and is *not* the only factor for the 'isms' of our day, but it does stand as a significant influential factor.

Patriarchal values have not been without their effect on religious thought in general and on Christianity in particular. In fact, with keen insight, theologians Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann jointly acknowledge that the 'distress of the divided and isolated male is reflected in the majesty of the God of the patriarchy'.⁷ The inescapable necessity of domination proceeding from the patriarchal values of separation and division has created a God who must, of necessity, be almighty. How else can any God withstand the force of collective domination inherent in the patriarchal culture? How else can God protect patriarchal culture from unleashing the destructive powers of patriarchal domination on itself? Such almighty power is certainly to be identified with all that is superior, all that is male.

The believer, acknowledging the omnipotence of such a God is placed in the position of subservience to this almighty yet beneficent God. Unquestioned obedience, sacrifice and the denial of self

become the appropriate response to this God, and to the religious and secular institutions and persons who mediate this almighty power on earth.

While Christianity can certainly not be blamed for the introduction of patriarchy into the world, it is most definitely to be acknowledged as both a significant victim, and a cultural carrier of patriarchy in our world today. The patriarchal values of separation and division, with their concurrent world view, have not only been accepted by Christianity, but have been theologically enshrined as dogmatic and spiritual guide-posts by which the Christian can order her or his life. Consequently, primary consideration is to be given to the 'spiritual life', to one's relationship with God, to the fate of one's soul—for it is, after all, the ultimate destiny of heaven or hell that really matters. All other considerations are relatively mundane, pertaining to the 'material life', the needs of the body, the needs of this world and, in fact, are distractions at best and temptations at worst in achieving our ultimate goal. The clear delineation of two worlds finds its extension in identifying theologically, all that is of God, all that is spiritual, with the stereotypically male characteristics of rationality and objectivity. The female, on the other hand, with the stereotypical characteristics of intuition and emotionality, is theologically relegated to the world of matter where the forces of sexuality and the unconscious operate in a manner which defy reason and logic. As such, woman in patriarchal Christianity, official Church pronouncements notwithstanding, is not only inferior, but also by her very nature becomes an object of suspicion and a threat to the world view which is supported by the unholy union of patriarchy and Christianity. Perhaps the reader will object at this point. Surely, this kind of thinking, well-intentioned though it may have been, was a distortion of the gospel and the Church's authentic teaching. Certainly the reform and renewal of Vatican II make it a thing of the past. The point is, however, that it did exist and has not been clearly identified for what it really was, namely, an example of the 'patriarchalization of the gospel',⁸ and the Church's teaching. Furthermore, all too often, careful analysis of the 'official Church' response to issues such as the role of the laity in the life of the Church, the role of priests and sisters in political ministry, sexuality questions, and the role of women in the Church, give evidence that patriarchy's dual world, with its hierarchical ordering of things is still very much operative.

To describe our culture as patriarchal is to acknowledge the existence of a network of common meanings and values which have served the function of transmitting, down through the centuries, the belief that the central theme of creation is separateness, a theme which blatantly denies the entire christian belief system. To acknowledge the effect of patriarchy on Christianity as evidenced, for example, in church hierarchical structures and the exclusion of women from the ordained ministry, is to mourn the fact that Christianity has allowed itself to be defined more by the predominant cultural values of western civilization, than by the gospel of Jesus Christ. To acknowledge the effects of patriarchy on western civilization in general, and on Christianity in particular, is to commit oneself to the process of re-infusing our church and world culture with the justice and vitality to be found in an authentic gospel-orientated world view.

Feminism

Feminism has been defined as 'that segment of the women's movement which fights not only for the equality of women, but also for a different culture'.⁹ Although it might come as a surprise to many, such an understanding of feminism opens up possibilities for feminist efforts to be viewed within the context of Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelization in the modern world*. This is the case because christian feminism¹⁰ at its best seeks, in the words of Paul VI, 'To affect and, as it were, upset, through the power of the gospel, humankind's criteria of judgment and determining values'.¹¹ Feminism is about the task of establishing the unity and interrelatedness of all creation as the determining values in civilization today. Working to establish this centrality, christian feminists are quick to acknowledge these values as ones which, while at the heart of the gospel message, are shared by feminists of various religious and humanist traditions. Feminists of diverse persuasions are thus united in their common attempt to undo the far-reaching and devastating effects that patriarchal separation and division have had on our world. From a roman catholic perspective, it can well be said that such feminists are trying to 'evangelize culture in depth and right to the very roots'.¹² Feminists know well that such an in-depth evangelization will only be accomplished through the articulation of an alternative world view. Such a world view is aptly expressed in a poem, *Merger*, written by a feminist artist, Judy Chicago:

And then all that has divided us will merge
And then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come to a world that is harsh and unkind
And then both men and women will be gentle
And then both men and women will be strong
And then no person will be subject to another's will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
And then the greed of some will give way to the needs of many
And then all will share equally in the earth's abundance
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young
And then all will cherish life's creatures
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the earth
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again.

The separation and division of patriarchy have been replaced not by fusion or the assimilation of differences into some amorphous entity, but by a vision which works to establish a new kind of relationship among characteristics which are both related and yet distinct. Where patriarchy named the difference deficiency, feminism strives to be open to the richness of diversity. Where patriarchy was compelled to render a judgment of comparative worth, feminism works at acknowledging the positive contribution of different functions. Where patriarchy found strangers and enemies, feminism tries to discover friends. Where patriarchy supports and strengthens the *status quo*, feminism engages in the beautiful, but often bitter struggle, of seeking to create personal, interpersonal and structural ways of relating which will ensure opportunities for equal participation on the part of all peoples. Where patriarchy's naming of women and all that is considered female to be inferior becomes a prototype for racism and classism, feminism's struggle to acknowledge the unique and equally important contribution of women and all that is considered female, becomes the cornerstone for the implementation of a world-view that acknowledges the unity and interrelatedness of all creation.

As is the case with patriarchal values, feminist values are also not without their effect on religious thought in general, and on Christianity in particular. It must first of all be acknowledged that for the feminist of any religious persuasion, and for the Christian feminist in particular, feminism is profoundly rooted in religious and/or gospel values. With theologian Jürgen Moltmann, feminists know that 'a God who is not more than "the almighty"' is not a

God, but a monster'.¹³ Christian feminists, drawing from the well-springs of the gospel and suppressed strands of theological reflection, are re-discovering 'the God who is in relationship, the God who can suffer, the uniting God, the God of fellowship and of community'.¹⁴ Christian feminists find themselves being drawn into what can well be described as a kind of mystical piety, wherein:

We do not honour God because of God's power over us; we immerse ourselves in God, in God's love . . . (our) relationship with God is not one of obedience but of unity where we are not subject to the commands of some remote being that demands sacrifice and the relinquishing of self, but rather where we are asked to become one with all of life.¹⁵

The dualistic world of patriarchal Christianity is gathered into a single movement wherein 'all creation groans' as together we move toward the fullness of life which is the common destiny of all.

Bonding

How, one might well be asking, is this feminist culture to come about? Is not the feminist culture described above either some utopian dream which can never be realized, or a description of the end of time when the reign of God will have come in its fullness? It is certainly not the former, but it does represent the human effort which is mysteriously inherent in God's bestowing the fullness of the reign on all creation.

What, then, is this human effort? The opening paragraphs of this article described bonding as the critical praxis of feminism which can and does serve as a vehicle toward the evangelization of patriarchal culture. Any world-view, latin american liberation theologians have taught us, must not only be correct in its theoretical formulation, but must also be accompanied by appropriate action which furthers the vision contained in the theory. It is this very action—praxis—with its subsequent consequences, which can and does serve as both a corrective to the articulated theory, and as a measurement of ultimate fidelity and commitment to the vision. In accord with feminist theory in general, christian feminism holds to the fundamental belief of the unity and interrelatedness of all creation. Bonding as the critical praxis of christian feminism furthers this vision through attempting to discover how gathering around our unity and interrelatedness, in the face of our differences,

will generate energy which can create new personal, interpersonal and structural ways of relating with one another and with the earth. Bonding is a way of relating which sets the differences that exist between us in the broader context of the fundamental unity which we share with one another and with the earth. As such, the more powerful energy emanating from our interrelatedness becomes a force with the potential for redirecting the energy emanating from our differences, an energy which, history has proven, when left to itself, produces disastrous results. Certainly, for the christian feminist, this unity is none other than the unity which is derived from our common status as daughters and sons of a loving creator God; this interrelatedness, the connections that exist between us as sisters and brothers of a loving, redeeming God; this energy none other than the life force of a loving, sanctifying God. Christian feminist bonding, in the final analysis, is an attempt to fashion all personal, interpersonal and structural relating in a way which will release the life force of the Trinity which is the deepest energy at work within God, within the self, within others, and within the universe.

At this point, it would no doubt prove helpful to examine the contribution of christian feminists engaged in bonding through reflecting on some specific examples. One practical consequence of the feminist call to relate to one another and to the earth out of a sense of unity and interrelatedness is the stubborn resistance of feminists to naming the other 'enemy', even in the face of different ideologies, including atheistic ideologies. In this regard, the positive effects of feminist bonding can be seen in the peace movement. In spite of the warring attitudes of all of the nations engaged in the nuclear arms race, feminists have striven to bond with those the patriarchy has named 'enemy'. The results of these efforts can be seen in international peace exchange programmes among children as well as scientists, and international grass-roots efforts encouraging a broad range of disarmament initiatives. Echoing the profoundly christian feminist sentiment that we will have to learn to live with our differences, or we will all die together, the feminist peace movement recognizes with the popes of the nuclear age that the basis of peace is to be found not merely in the absence of war, but also in the creation of a world order which ensures justice and peace for all. Built upon a belief in the rights of all, the energy released from experiences of bonding is being directed toward both the reform of existing societal structures and, where needs be, the

creation of alternative structures. This is demonstrated, for example, in the corporate responsibility and alternative investment movements, which work not only toward the elimination of oppression produced by unjust corporate practices, but also seek to create structures that will ensure that the poor will be authors of their own destiny, and have their rightful share in the resources of our world.

The fact that feminist bonding is a way of relating which is totally committed to drawing out the richness of diversity, opens it to the challenge of discovering new and alternative methods of dealing with the conflicts that differences can often create. The creative energy which is both discovered and released in bonding experiences rejects violence as a method for settling conflict. Instead, the energy derived from feminist bonding is the driving force behind the revival of efforts to enhance humankind's skill in non-violent conflict resolution. Creativity and unconventionality abound here, as feminists literally 'beat swords into ploughshares', attempt to blockade Trident submarines in a flotilla of rowboats, send delegations of unarmed civilians and religious leaders to monitor situations in volatile refugee camps in Central America, and 'sit in' at congressional offices in an effort to reverse a policy of continuing military intervention in Central America.

Feminist effort to gather around the unity and interrelatedness of all, in the face of the vast differences existing within the human community (bonding) has not been without its moments of frustration and bitter disappointment. It is no easy task to overcome the suspicion and hatred that has been engendered by centuries of patriarchy. In this regard, bonding may well be viewed as a ascetical practice of feminism. Indeed, the repeated attempts at bonding require that feminists be practised in the virtues of trust, forgiveness, reconciliation, hope and love—all essential elements of the gospel. From one perspective, the ascetism of bonding is no more poignantly experienced than when one is in relation with the internal structure of the institutional Church. As the christian feminist world-view becomes more fully integrated into the totality of a person, much of the structure, and many of the practices of the institution are, of necessity, called into question. The fact that such reflection is often viewed as an attack on the Church rather than an attempt on the part of the faithful to involve the Church in the process of on-going conversion is most unfortunate indeed. However, it is helpful if one remembers that the increased involve-

ment of the Church in issues of justice and peace is a significant indicator that the world view of patriarchy is indeed giving way to the gospel vision of unity and interrelatedness of all creation. This, in and of itself, is a crucial factor involved in the evangelization of patriarchal Christianity within the wider context of patriarchal culture.

Conclusion

Hopefully, the reflections contained herein have been helpful in allowing one to understand more clearly how patriarchy has functioned in bringing our world community to the point of massive conflict. (Christian) feminism, with its alternate values, makes the very necessary contribution of the presentation of a vision of a preferred world. Bonding, as the critical praxis of feminism, is supplying that programme of action and reflection wherein the personal, interpersonal and structural relationships of this world are being transformed in a manner which is creative of a more perfect form of justice among men and women. It has been demonstrated that bonding seeks to replace the destructive energy of patriarchy with the energy derived from the unity and interrelatedness of all creation. In as much as attempts at bonding continue to release among us the life-force of the Trinity—which is the deepest energy at work within God, within self, within others and within the universe—bonding serves as a radical vehicle towards the in-depth evangelization of patriarchal culture.

NOTES

¹ United States Catholic Bishops, *The challenge of peace: God's promise and our response* (Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference 1983), p 6.

² Clarke, Thomas E.: 'To make peace, evangelize culture', *America*, June 2, 1984, p 414.

³ McKee, Char: 'Feminism: a vision of love', *Women of power*, Summer 1985, p 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 4.

⁵ Warnock, Donna: 'Patriarchy is a killer', *Reweaving the web of life*, ed. Pam McAllister, (Pennsylvania, New Society Publishers, 1982), p 24.

⁶ McKee, p 4.

⁷ Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth, and Moltmann, Jürgen: *Humanity in God* (New York, The Pilgrim Press, 1983), p 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 4.

⁹ Soelle, Dorothee: *The strength of the weak* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1984), p 82.

¹⁰ As a Roman Catholic writing for a journal of christian spirituality, I have a particular interest in noting that feminism not only finds its roots in the gospel, but can even be seen in the context of certain papal documents. The use of the word 'christian' in reference to feminism and feminist praxis in the preceding pages is meant to highlight this. It is not meant to overlook or denigrate the contribution of feminists who choose to identify with no religious tradition, or with non-christian traditions.

¹¹ Pope Paul VI, *On evangelization in the modern world* (Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference), p 16.

¹² *Ibid.*, p 12.

¹³ Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel and Jürgen Moltmann, p 114.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p 112.

¹⁵ Soelle, p 102.