

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Feminist Approaches to Theology, I

IS IT POSSIBLE to be both a woman and a Christian at the same time? Is the Christian message good tidings or bad news for women? Can a feminist theologize as a Christian? To increasing numbers of women, these questions are not trivial, nor are the answers self-evident. As women struggle to be faithful to their experience while keeping open the dialogue with their Christian roots, they are probing the boundaries of theology.

This first of two articles will discuss the contributions of feminists to the foundational issue of theological method—*how* theology is done—with examples drawn from questions in systematic theology and scripture studies. A subsequent article will address areas of spirituality, worship and ethics. Both will attempt to focus on the ways in which women are challenging and revivifying Christian theology.

A preliminary note on terminology is in order. The category ‘female’ names a biological fact of life. The term ‘feminine’ refers to a whole realm of attitudes, behaviours and expectations which are constructed and fostered by socio-cultural forces. ‘Feminist’ describes a critical stance which affirms women as full human persons equal to men, and which denounces, while working to transform, those concepts, relationships and structures which perpetuate the domination of men over women. Thus a woman is born female, and may be socially conditioned into being feminine, but she must choose to be feminist.

Applied to the Christian context, then, feminism names as sexist those distortions in belief and practice which reflect a perception of women as inferior. Feminists work to free women from whatever in Church and society would stunt their growth. Feminist scholars, working collaboratively and across disciplines, find in women’s experience a fertile source for theological reflection.¹ So feminist theology is critical, committed, constructive and rooted in concrete experience.

‘Patriarchy’, as feminists understand it, is any system—social, religious, economic, philosophical, familial—which rests on male privilege and power and which perpetuates a model of relationship built on domination and subordination.

Contemporary developments in theology

Let us briefly situate feminist theology within the broader stream of contemporary developments in theology’s understanding of itself and how it is done.

First, all reflection, including reflection on God, the world and human reality, takes place in a particular historical and cultural context. Theologians are influenced, consciously or not, by the civil government, by the economic conditions and political climate at any given moment, by the philosophical currents in vogue, by the ideologies which shape the prevailing myths, by the art, film, music and literature of their age, by the technological discoveries which subtly and not-so-subtly shape their lives, by the rapidly changing winds of popular culture. All these forces have an impact on the community of believers, out of and on behalf of which the theologian speaks. Indeed, that community itself is constantly subject to change; whether it is at peace or under siege, whose interests are addressed within it and whose are excluded—factors such as these will affect the tenor and even the content of a community's reflection on its life and relationship to its God.

The impact of critical analysis, which calls into question the implicit presuppositions, the unquestionable givens behind any theory, leads to the further recognition that theology, along with other modes of human discourse, is not neutral.² Its selection of emphases, its language, its texts embody a particular stance of its creators toward power and the powers that rule their world. Theologies take positions of advocacy; they seek, though not always consciously, either to uphold or to change the *status quo*.

The Churches of the Third World, in particular, have fostered awareness of theology's built-in biases. E. Schüssler Fiorenza identifies as the starting point of liberation theologies the key insight that 'all theology knowingly or not is by definition always engaged for or against the oppressed'.³

Attending to theology's historical and cultural context, and uncovering the concrete commitments out of which it is written, are but two aspects of the massive methodological shift in contemporary theology toward taking human experience seriously.

The feminist challenge

But, feminists ask, whose experience really counts as 'human experience'? For centuries, only men's search to understand their faith (the classic description of theology) has been recognized as authoritative. Women have been 'protected' from access to the tools of theological scholarship and to the public forum of dialogue and debate.⁴ Although women as well as men have experienced God, the overwhelming number of those who have recorded, selected, interpreted and analyzed that experience have been men.

So women are legitimately asking, 'Where are the records of *our* experience of God? Where is the God in whose image we too, as well as our brothers, are made? Where is women's perspective on the nature of

human life, the dynamics of human living, the goal of human possibilities, the reality of human pathology? Where is the sound of women's voice in the theological chorus?'

Such questions as these cut to the heart of the matter, calling into question the very foundations of the Christian world-view.

Feminists challenge a theology which speaks to them of:

—a Father-God who reflects the image of an all-powerful Roman *paterfamilias* or feudal lord and master, more concerned with exacting tribute and punishing offences than with sharing the fulness of life, power, creativity and love;

—a Redeemer whose saving work has been understood more in terms of his maleness than through his humanness, and whose radical identification with the poor, with women, with those considered unimportant and expendable by the powers of his world has been domesticated into harmless generalities;

—a vision of the person built on philosophies which identified the male as the norm and the human, and the female as an inferior, 'misbegotten' male;

—a Church whose organizational structures enshrine rather than challenge societal arrangements and stereotypes of female-male roles, and which requires women to adhere to its beliefs, follow its precepts and participate in its worship, while allowing them little if any public role in its teaching, sanctifying and governing office;

—a cult which venerates Mary, holding up her virginal motherhood (or her motherly virginity) as an ideal impossible for flesh-and-blood women to attain, thereby stripping this first-century Jewish girl of her own identity and forcing her to bear the weight of each age's concept of the 'ideal woman'.⁵

Feminists ask: 'Can such be the will of the true and living God?' Their resounding 'No!' is turning theology upside down.

Out of their experience of exclusion, women, like Third World theologians, read the Hebrew and Christian scriptures with new eyes. For some, the problem is simply that the texts which recount the story of Israel's covenant with God and of the words, acts and intentions of Jesus have consistently been interpreted in a way that is at best forgetful, and at worst contemptuous, of women. Others point out that the very texts which enshrine the story of salvation are the work of men, tainted by the exclusionary bias of patriarchy. Salvation history is literally 'his'-story. Some feel that the tradition is hopelessly patriarchal and beyond salvaging, while others are committed to wrestling with it, trying to uncover the deeper, liberating power of its message.

Feminist scripture scholars are questioning the principles of selection that kept some memories of Jesus's actions and words intact, subtly altered others, and chose to forget still others—memories now accessible

through recent discoveries of some non-canonical writings. These scholars are also working to unmask the biases which lie behind the texts, attempting to reconstruct the life of the communities—the *Sitzen im Leben*—which gave birth to the scriptures. In so doing, they are bringing to light the hidden women who played key and often controversial roles in the birth and expansion of the people of God in both covenants.

Women are found among those whom Jesus touches, heals and calls; they play a more significant role than do the male apostles in being the first to bear witness to the Resurrection. Then, by and large, women seem to fade from the memory of the life of the early communities. Even Mary, mother of Jesus, so visible at the foot of the cross and at the Pentecostal outpouring of the Spirit, disappears back into the shadows. In Acts, one catches glimpses of women collaborating with men in spreading the good news and in building up communal life and worship, yet it is two men, Peter and Paul, who dominate the accounts of the earliest days of the Church.

In fairness, one must recognize that women are not the only ones whose voices have been lost. Much of the sound of any serious difference of opinion regarding mission, leadership and worship in the apostolic and post-apostolic Churches has been muffled, with the obvious and significant exception of the debate over gentile conversion which occasioned the first Council of Jerusalem.

Just as Paul's foundations in the Greco-Roman world varied one from another in gifts and problems, so did the Churches which had developed earlier in Jerusalem, Galilee and Samaria. Scholars have begun to probe the implications of this diversity and to reconstruct the social and ecclesial settings reflected therein. In some of these communities, it is suggested, women such as Mary of Magdala and others closely linked with Jesus during his life may have taken leading roles.

From her analysis of Jesus's dialogues with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4, 1-42) and the Syrophenician woman (Mk 7, 24-30), both Gentiles, Fiorenza concludes that women were the first non-Jews to join the Jesus movement. Moreover, the theological arguments which these women are recorded as offering to Jesus signal 'the historical leadership women had in opening up Jesus's movement and community' to gentiles beyond the covenant community of Israel.⁶

Fiorenza and other feminists challenge the myopic assumption that Christian life in the first century rather closely approximated 'customary' social arrangements, with men making major decisions and managing the affairs of the community, and women providing the perennial support services behind the scenes.

How do feminists do theology?

E. Schüssler Fiorenza has cogently articulated the method as it applies to her work in the field of scripture, and feminists have found it

widely applicable in approaching any theological text. Feminist theological method involves a mode of interpretation marked by *suspicion, proclamation, remembrance* and *revisioning*.

First, one approaches all texts and interpretations of Christian belief and life with *suspicion*, wary of the underlying prejudices and presuppositions which have excluded the perspective of women. Fiorenza states her rationale thus:

A feminist hermeneutics cannot trust or accept Bible and tradition simply as divine revelation. Rather it must critically evaluate them as patriarchal articulations, since . . . biblical texts are not the words of God but the words of men.⁷

In other words, new sight demands new eyes with which to see. The journey of transformation envisioned by feminists begins with the suspicion that an androcentric bias pervades even the holiest of words, and that hidden in the shadows of the scriptures, ready to emerge into the light, stand the till-now invisible figures of our mothers and sisters in faith.

The second step in feminist theological method is that of *critique*. Having donned new lenses, one begins to recognize the distortions which one mistook for reality. Sharon Welch, borrowing from the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, outlines a number of such distortions, noting that feminists

find oppression at the heart of the Christian tradition: in the exclusively masculine symbolism for the divine; in a dualism that devalues the body and the historical; in a hierarchical understanding of power and the order of creation; in an imperial concept of divine power; in a triumphant, absolute christology; in definitions of sin as pride and rebellion—definitions that prevent revolt.⁸

Many of the faults which feminists find in Christianity are similar to those noted by other theologians of liberation. They ask:

—how Christian theological tradition, almost exclusively the work of western males, can claim to express universal human experience;

—whose power is reinforced or maintained by the tradition, and whose is challenged?

—whose views of God, or reality, of self, of others are enshrined in the tradition and made normative?

Critiquing even the criteria by which theology is judged truthful, feminists apply another norm to the bible and to the Christian tradition as well as to contemporary experience. They question how that tradition or that experience functions, that is, 'whether or not it serves to oppress

or liberate people',⁹ especially women. Thus, critique becomes prophetic proclamation, as distortions in the liberating word are named and false idols unmasked.

But the task of feminist theological re-visioning does not end with critique. It moves toward rebuilding theology into a more adequate reflection of a human experience which includes women. Some aspects of such a reconstructed theology are the following:

1. Attentiveness to the *personal and particular* character of every theology. At the beginning of every seemingly apodictic pronouncement, feminists note, stands the implicit qualification, 'in my opinion' or 'from my perspective'. At its core, theology is story-telling.

2. Attentiveness to *connections*. In its passion for clear and distinct ideas, theology has often lost sight of itself as a single fabric. Feminist theologians are much less likely to divorce biblical exegesis from ethics, or systematics from spirituality. A book such as Rosemary Haughton's *The passionate God*¹⁰ illustrates this holistic approach; while it may be difficult to classify, it never loses sight of the breadth of theology's vision and its rootedness in, and accountability to, the real questions of flesh-and-blood beings. In addition, feminism maintains that all forms of oppression, whether between sexes, races, nations, cultures or classes are interconnected, and so efforts to redress those imbalances must also be linked.

3. Attentiveness to *the earth*. Ruether's earlier work, *New woman, new earth*,¹¹ developed the intimate connection between society's treatment of women and its attitude toward nature, showing how both have been relegated to positions of inferiority. In *Sexism and God-talk*,¹² she further analyzes the correlation between the domination of women and of nature. She sketches the outlines of a feminist position that challenges the hierarchical model of nature which views human as superior to non-human reality.

4. Attentiveness to *freedom and power*. These attributes of a people created and redeemed by a loving God have sometimes been minimized by theology in favour of docility and obedience. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza maintains that women as well as men find their fundamental Christian identity within a 'discipleship of equals'.¹³ Only such a community is worthy of free citizens brought into the household of God and enlivened with the Spirit of power.

5. Attentiveness to *ongoing conversion*. Feminists call theologians to continuous critical reflections on their own positions and on their concrete consequences. With whom does theology stand? Whose perspective does it reflect? Whom does it challenge and whom support? Out of what concrete context does it arise?

The language of theology

A key issue in feminist re-visioning of theology is that of the language used to name and image God. Many women find their tradition deficient

because it describes God preferentially as male. In thus excluding women as unsuitable images of the divine, Christian tradition demeans the human dignity of women. Moreover, in maintaining a male image of God, Christianity violates the limits of human beings and the transcendence and mystery of the divine. The task is to re-image God by analogy to the full male and female reality of humankind, so that women can recognize God in themselves and themselves in God.

Elizabeth Johnson surveys three ways in which women are fashioning a new God-language.¹⁴ Some ascribe 'feminine' traits to God, balancing 'his' omnipotence with gentleness, motherly compassion and other qualities. Yet the norm is still a God who is more male than female. Others speak of a 'feminine principle' in God, identified with the Holy Spirit, who is viewed as the fount of the typically 'feminine' characteristics. Besides the subordinationism often inherent in this theology of the Spirit, Johnson notes another deficiency:

Nurturing and tenderness simply do not exhaust the capacities of women, nor do bodiliness and instinct define women's nature, nor is creative transformative agency beyond the scope of women's power.¹⁵

She opts for imaging God equivalently as male and female, an approach which maintains the mysterious otherness of God (no person in our experience exists as male and female) yet recognizes that both sexes have been created as icons of the divine.

Women are writing volumes about many other foundational issues in theology—about Christ, creation and redemption, human experience, bodiliness, sexuality, power, ministry, Church, mission, social and personal sin and transformation. Much pain and anger accompany them as they watch the death of, and help to demolish, the certainties (theological and otherwise) of their own past. Some experience it as an exile, an experience of the 'dark night'.¹⁶ Others speak of a new exodus out of which a renewed community will be shaped.¹⁷

But it is the poets who can best articulate the hope and the fear of women doing theology today. Feminist Christians who take up the task of challenging and reconstructing theology know themselves to be, in the powerful images of Adrienne Rich, like miners, standing where 'the dark lode weeps for light', and like deep-sea divers, come to 'explore the wreck . . . to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail'.¹⁸

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NOTES

- ¹ For an overview of 'reformist' and 'revolutionary' approaches among feminist theologians, cf Anne Carr, 'Is a Christian feminist theology possible?' *Theological Studies* 43 (1982), pp 279-297.
- ² Cf Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Boston, Beacon, 1984), esp. ch 3.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p 45.
- ⁴ For example, although women have for some time been accepted to academic degree courses in Roman Catholic theology programmes in the United States, professional degree programmes in ministry have admitted women only within the past few decades.
- ⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether makes a major contribution towards a feminist systematic theology in her *Sexism and God-talk* (Boston, 1983), which documents these and other objections and offers alternative feminist approaches to theology.
- ⁶ Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler: *In memory of her* (New York, Crossroad, 1984), p 138.
- ⁷ Fiorenza, *Bread not stone*, pp x-xi.
- ⁸ Welch, Sharon: *Communities of resistance and solidarity: a feminist theology of liberation* (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 1985), p 68.
- ⁹ Fiorenza, *Bread not stone*, p 62.
- ¹⁰ Published in London by Darton Longman & Todd and in New York, by Paulist, 1982.
- ¹¹ New York, Seabury, 1975.
- ¹² Cf esp. ch 3.
- ¹³ Fiorenza, *In memory of her*, Epilogue.
- ¹⁴ 'The incomprehensibility of God and the image of God male and female', in Joann Wolski Conn, (ed), *Women's spirituality: resources for Christian development* (New York, Paulist, 1986), pp 243-260.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 252.
- ¹⁶ Cf Margaret Brennan, 'Women and theology: singing of God in an alien land', *The Way Supplement* 53 (Summer 1985), pp 93-103; Constance FitzGerald, 'Impasse and dark night', in Conn, (ed), *Women's spirituality*, pp 287-311.
- ¹⁷ Fiorenza, *In memory of her*, Epilogue.
- ¹⁸ Adrienne Rich, 'Natural resources' and 'Diving into the wreck', in *The fact of a doorframe* (New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1984), pp 263, 163.