

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Reclaiming the Truth of Women's Lives: Women and Spirituality

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.¹ Women today *are* daring to tell their truth, to break open the silence in which their lives have for generations been shrouded. More and more of them are using the language of spirituality as they name their new sense of themselves, of the world, of God and of their own Godlikeness.

This article will explore the contributions of some contemporary women to our understandings of the nature and scope of spirituality, with particular attention to the perspective of feminist Christians.

Several years ago, a noted feminist scholar wrote that, after centuries of 'spiritual colonization' by men, women had not yet found a language to describe the spirituality which they were beginning to live.² That observation may already be outdated, judging by the growing volume of written and spoken material on the theme.

First, what are women saying about spirituality in general?

Most would see it holistically, linking it with the whole range of human development. For Joann Wolski Conn, Christian spirituality 'involves the human capacity of self-transcending knowledge, love, and commitment as it is actualized through the experience of God, in Jesus, the Christ, by the gift of the Spirit'.³ Holism and self-transcendence also play a central role in the work of Denise Lardner Carmody. In her feminist spirituality, an upward spiral symbolizes the human impulse to stretch beyond ourselves, and 'Lady Wisdom' stands for the wholeness toward which we all aspire.⁴

The language of 'transcending' rather than 'denying' the self is significant for several reasons. Both Conn and Carmody, acknowledging their debt to Rahner, intend to evoke the image of the person as a being open to, and capable of communion with, ultimate Mystery. As such, the self to be transcended is good, graced, not evil.

But to maintain that movement beyond the self to others and to God is not only possible but necessary presumes that there is a self to move beyond. Herein lies a major problematic for women: socialized to place the needs of others before their own, women often repress awareness of their own rightful needs, or feel guilty and 'selfish' for even having them.⁵ So the task of spiritual self-transcendence for a woman demands that she first grow into and claim her conscious and responsible selfhood.

Anne Carr makes an important distinction between 'women's' spirituality and 'feminist' spirituality. The former term refers to the ways in which women, in contrast to men, relate to the ultimate dimension of life—ways as distinctive as women themselves. Underneath the distinctions, we might notice some aspects common to women's experience, in contrast to men's: women seem more related to nature and to other people, more concrete, more heart- than head-centred, for example.

On the other hand, feminists—described as 'those who are deeply aware of the historical and cultural restriction of women to a narrowly defined "place" within the wider human (male) "world"'⁶—live a spirituality shaped by this consciousness. Claiming firm Christian as well as cultural foundations, feminist spirituality is critical of the reality of women's subordination and committed to changing attitudes and structures which reinforce that evil.

Born of women's experience

Since they find that much of traditional spiritual teaching ignores, rejects or distorts the truth of women's lives, Christian feminists speak of a spirituality born out of 'the womb of their own experience'.⁷

Their experience is marked, first of all, by centuries of *exclusion*. Prohibited from seeking ordained ministry, banished by law and convention from the public forum, and ignored in their distinctive experience of the holy, women have learned to image themselves as 'outsiders'. They have been treated as unworthy to enter sacred space, too delicate to meddle in secular affairs. Ever present behind the scenes, they are seldom seen, heard or taken seriously in the *polis* of Church and state.⁸ A multi-levelled process of transformation and conversion is thus required to change the socio-economic systems which still hold women captive and insignificant, as well as to uproot the attitudes of inferiority and self-doubt which centuries of patriarchy have imbedded in women's psyches.

The experience of *connection* is another component at the core of women's spirituality. Relationships link women to ancestral past and children's future, to lovers in the next village and friends across the globe, weaving a web of life which shapes women's understanding of their identity and which enables them to perceive reality as whole, interconnected, organic. They pray and act out of the intuition that heart and head, spirit and body, form an inseparable unity.

Feminist theologians bring this same holistic approach to their work. They respect the ways in which people's beliefs follow as well as give rise to their behaviour, and in which their rituals embody both belief and action. Thus, feminist spirituality will integrate elements of ethics, liturgy and systematics in its reflections.⁹

Third, women speak of a new experience of *power*, and of the truth they have come to know in the process of discovering, claiming, receiving

and sharing power. They find a genuine 'paraclete' in the Spirit, whom they experience as present within, energizing and giving life, active in human hearts and history. They find themselves standing before a God who as Mystery calls them beyond the present moment, who as Life-Giver shares creative power with them, who as Mother/Father names them beloved. Like the women of Israel, they know that it is the power of God's reign which Jesus embodies, a power which makes sure that they, with all the poor, have a place in 'the discipleship of equals',¹⁰ a power which speaks of servanthood rather than domination. Women envision new ways of sharing power in the community gathered for mission, and celebrate the rich diversity of gifts present in the worshipping assembly.

A new 'wisdom literature' is being born out of the stories of women's spirituality. Indeed, women are reclaiming 'Lady Wisdom' as their own guiding muse, and rediscovering from Judaeo-Christian wisdom theology a tradition by which both Israel and Jesus imaged God as *Sophia*.¹¹

A framework for feminist spirituality

Speaking at a recent conference on women in the Church,¹² Madonna Kolbenschlag identified four characteristics of feminist spirituality: passion, imagination, resistance and solidarity. These will serve as reference points from which we can further explore spirituality from the perspective of contemporary Christian feminism.

1. Passion: reclaiming incarnation.

Our third and fourth century ancestors, steeped in world-denying philosophies, taught that *apatheia*, or freedom from passion, was a state to be sought as prerequisite to contemplative union with God. Free from the inner warfare of the unruly passions, with all one's powers in harmony with God's design, one could see rightly and judge truly about the things that really mattered.

But the alchemy of time and the interplay of cultures gradually transmuted that healthy respect for the power of passion into hostility and disgust for the base and disordered emotions. The resulting spiritual ethos often produced people who resembled robots more than human beings on fire with love of God and their neighbour.

It is right that fear and awe should be evoked in us by the power of our passions, and inevitable that in our search for wholeness we should struggle to balance *eros* and *logos*. But it is wrong to conclude that passion and its cognates—matter, earth, the body, sexuality, desire and (not surprisingly) woman—are evil. In spite of the reality of incarnation, on which our faith rests, Christians seem perennially drawn to this conclusion.

From the womb of history, people have feared and worshipped the passions associated with life, sexuality, fertility and death, and the life-bearing and life-giving powers associated with women. One way of dealing with fear is to redirect it into hatred and rage. As feminists have documented, women's bodies have been treated as property to be flaunted and traded, as territory to be conquered, as moral quicksand to be avoided. Their emotions have been stifled and trivialized.

A feminist spirituality reclaims the holiness of our enspirited bodies and the gift of passion as a force to move us onward. Rosemary Haughton reminds us of the 'passionate God' whose being is to love and to embrace us in that love. The ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison calls women to harness 'the power of anger in the work of love'.¹³ And Haughton writes of the *eros* at the heart of human history which drives 'minds and hearts made for wisdom, for the Wise Word that would set them free'.¹⁴

2. *Imagination: reclaiming symbols.*

Feminist scholars have documented women's exclusion from the ranks of those who shaped the symbols and meanings which became the dominant myths of our civilization. The exclusion was not accidental, nor is it ended, as evidenced by the virtual absence of women from positions of influence in fields such as government, religion and communications, fields recognized as keepers of our symbol systems.

Feminist spirituality draws on the power of imagination to develop symbols which mirror alternative views of reality. For instance, Haughton suggests that, if the symbol of Eve was used by a male-dominated culture to connote 'women's innate sinfulness, her power to degrade and corrupt, or . . . divine punishment laid on all womankind', then Jesus's empowerment of women could be described as 'the re-creation of Eve'.¹⁵

Haughton creatively portrays the women of the New Testament in dialogue with a Jesus who relentlessly refused to let them stay hidden. They responded to him by emerging from the shadows of history to touch and be touched by him, to listen and learn, to find healing, to share water and bread and friendship, to follow him along country roads and city streets, even to the place where he was executed as a criminal. It takes imagination to question, as Jesus did, time-honoured understandings of sin and righteousness, to conceive alternatives, to choose to act in another way.¹⁶

The infamous apple of the Genesis myth is transformed by Carmody into 'the apple of God's eye', symbol of 'the human being fully alive, stretching joyously toward his or her richest fruition'—an apple to be sought for and prized.¹⁷ Feminists replace the vertical, up-and-down symbolism of 'Jacob's ladder', with its overtones of going *up* to heaven in a vertical, hierarchical order, with the more inclusive and relational image of 'Sarah's circle'.

Metaphors are often drawn from women's bodily experience—giving birth to a new creation, acting as midwives of their own liberation—and from women's traditional work—'reweaving the web of life' (the title of a book on feminism and nonviolence),¹⁸ for example.

The image of the *ekklesia gynaiikon*, 'Women-Church', captures much of the struggle and hope of women who claim to stand in the tradition of a community in exodus from oppression. For two of its strongest advocates, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Ruether, Women-Church represents a necessary stage in the evolution of women's spiritual experience. Though seeming to be a separatist tactic, gathering women together outside the present institutions of the Church, its ultimate goal is a 'cohuman Church', 'a redemptive community of both men and women liberated from patriarchy'.¹⁹ For Ruether, the task of Women-Church is to imagine a non-patriarchal alternative to present Church structures, all the while keeping open the conversation with women who choose to work for change within the institution.

Creating alternatives, breaking out of impasses and dead ends, finding unexpected solutions, are skills desperately needed in a world locked in combat unto death; they are frequently skills of women. In 1982, during the visit of Pope John Paul II to the United States, Sr Theresa Kane imagined a Church whose leader would want to hear the pain of women. A young girl, Samantha Smith, imagined that Russia's head of state was a human being like herself, to whom she could speak directly. Several years ago, women dreamed of a world without war, and sewed thousands of banners into miles of 'Peace Ribbon' to tie around the Pentagon.

Imagination is the foundation of a spirituality of hope, a spirituality of the poor. Women may be closer to the fount of imagination because they stand on the fringes of the world's power. As Haughton asserts, 'In a patriarchal society women are those who are able, sometimes, to perceive an alternative, because—like the women who followed Jesus—they have nothing to gain from mere changes of power structures'.²⁰

Liturgy, feminists claim, should be the place where imagination finds a home, for symbols, images, art, music, drama and poetry are the language of worship. Yet Western Christian religious rituals, and most of those who lead communities in celebrating them, persist in being onesidedly cerebral, verbose, unimaginative and virtually hostile to beauty. Women are insisting that the arts be integrated into worship in a way that reflects the life of the gathered community, whether in an urban cathedral or in a mission outpost. More and more women are creating rites of their own, born out of the 'linguistic deprivation and eucharistic famine'²¹ which they experience in their parishes.

3. *Resistance: reclaiming the struggle.*

If, as Marcuse says, the success of the system is to make unthinkable the possibility of alternatives, then imagining alternatives is an act of

subverting the system, an act of resistance. For many women, spirituality has taken on the character of a struggle for survival. At one level, it is expressed in their refusal to accept unquestioningly, as reflective of universal human experience, the definitions, doctrines, worldviews, prohibitions and patterns created by men.

For example, developmental models, based on the observation that persons pass through predictable stages as they grow toward cognitive, emotional, moral and religious maturity, are commonly accepted. However, studies of women's lives reveal that their perspectives on maturation, identity formation, social roles and responsibilities, and decision-making often differ from the so-called 'normative' views and patterns.²² The 'norms', they suggest, are not automatically normative for women; not only do they fail to reflect women's lives accurately, but they seem to have been formulated as though women's experience were nonexistent or aberrational.

Such oversight is particularly evident when feminists examine the doctrine and preaching about sin. As traditionally interpreted, the Genesis creation myth portrays pride as the capital sin of rebellious humankind. As traditionally applied, women note, this reading has also served to legitimate the state of male dominance and enforce women's submission to authority. Insistence on the root sin of pride has effectively obscured the pattern of timidity, self-depreciation, burying of talents and masochistic selflessness which is more typical of women's pathology. Feminists accuse Christianity of stunting the growth of women by preaching the necessity of self-denial to their already underdeveloped selves. They point out that the primal sin from which women need to be saved is not the sin of pride but the 'sin of hiding'²³—hiding their voices, their ideas, their rage, their gifts, their very selves.

As a crucial step in a woman's journey to maturity, she must come to terms with the experience of having to choose and act as an independent agent. For men, the research says, the catalyst for transformation is *intimacy*. But for women, who have been socialized into patterns of intimacy and relationship since childhood, maturity demands confrontation with *choice*. It appears that the absoluteness of caring as principle of women's identity formation has to be challenged by her growing awareness of herself as a separate being with legitimate needs.

Not only the models of psychology but the canons of morality as well are feeling the force of women's resistance. Out of their experience of exclusion, feminists are claiming the right to name the truth of their experience, to reject moral norms fashioned without attention to that experience, and to shape a new language of ethical discourse. The work of Margaret Farley on commitment, Mary E. Hunt on female friendship, and Beverly Wildung Harrison on the methodology of connectedness, demonstrates the richness and originality of women's perspectives on

ethics.²⁴ Far from being distant, abstract and bloodless, women's approach to morality arises from the crucible of pain and struggle, of violence endured and resisted. A feminist ethic, as a result, is marked by the need to affirm life in the face of death; it is an ethics of care.

Yet the tension is always present; women know the competing claims of care, and the anguish of being torn apart by them. Perhaps this anguish is most painfully evident today in the moral dilemmas of sexuality and reproductive ethics.

Regardless of one's position on this and other issues of sexuality, their complexity cannot be fully understood without reference to the history of exploitation of women by men's exercise of legal and sexual 'rights' over them. As a woman begins to question traditional sexual arrangements, she may come to the awareness that her body is something other than a breeding ground owned by a man and forced to bear the consequences of his 'right to choose'. She may begin to claim her own right to be treated as an equal, a sexual partner, instead of a victim.

Clearly, from a Christian perspective, issues such as abortion and sexual conduct involve far more than the competing rights of individuals.²⁵ Resistance to an ethos which would paint these sensitive questions of life in 'either-or' terms is demanded. What if women on either side of the pro-choice/anti-abortion debate directed their anger, not against each other, but against the inequities of a system which requires that they bear the major responsibility for raising children, often with little emotional or financial support; a system which ignores the fact that the vast majority of the world's poor are women and children; a system which funds missile deployment and weapons research rather than human services? What if women looked at the problems which drive some of them to seek abortion as a solution, and mobilized their resistance against a society which allows those problems to fester?

The 'seamless garment' ethic, based on the inseparability of all life-related issues, borrows its imagery from the product of women's work, weaving. What if women chose to unite in common concern, not shrinking from their power, but harnessing it in the service of life?

Roman Catholic feminists, in Carmody's view, bear a 'double cross': they are ostracized by their 'pro-choice' sisters for their unpopular stance on abortion, and at the same time rejected by their Church for advocating women's ordination. Though churchmen continue to close the doors of ordained ministry to them, women are refusing the refusal. Out of a spirituality of resistance, they call the personal and structural exclusion by its true name—sin. The more sanguine among them recognize the gifts which women can and do bring to ministry, and conclude that the difficulty women are experiencing in realizing equality in their Church is 'probably the key sign of that contemporary institution's sinfulness'.²⁶

A spirituality of resistance deeply threatens those who are charged with protecting the system from change, whether in the name of God's will, the common good or the future of civilization. Feminists know that the journey will take them, perhaps many times, to the point of impasse, where once-consoling symbols shatter, where formerly sustaining bonds must be broken. As they confront this new face of the classic 'dark night' experience, they gain a new understanding of the dynamic of feminist conversion, which for them seems to be 'not so much giving up egocentric notions of power as passing through an experience of nothingness finally to gain power over their own lives'.²⁷

4. Solidarity: reclaiming the community of life.

Christian feminists believe that the Good News summons and creates a community. Such a view does not seek to bury individual responsibility in the collective conscience, but rather to correct the distortions which have made morality and spirituality a private affair between God and each person.

In contrast, feminists envision Christian spirituality as 'eating together, sharing together, drinking together, talking with each other, receiving each other, experiencing God's presence through each other', and in the concrete communion of such actions, thereby 'proclaiming the gospel as God's alternative vision for everyone, especially for those who are poor, outcast, and battered'.²⁸

The image of 'connection' describes the feminist commitment to a relational way of knowing, living, acting and praying. One author finds that 'the quest for wholeness: the apprehension of . . . everything . . . as intrinsically interrelated' is characteristic of women's way of knowing.²⁹ Another suggests that women's desire for connectedness with God and with others is a 'modern expression of the way of affirmation', which finds the image of the Holy in all that is.³⁰ 'Bonding' (a feminist catchword) carries resonances of critical reflection, deliberate choice and informed action.³¹

Women who gather to worship in 'communities of nurture', as Ruether describes the movement of Women-Church, appear divisive to some, threatening to others. Like all assemblies of subjugated people, they provoke contempt and even fear among those who hold power. But the goal of feminists is not to replace men in power, whether ecclesiastical or secular, with women so as to overturn the arrangements of oppression. They seek a whole new approach to power.

Women's common experience of powerlessness links them across historical, cultural and religious boundaries. Keeping alive the 'dangerous memory' of their suffering, and making concrete their solidarity with other women across socio-economic lines are central items on the feminist agenda. They are central, too, to a feminist spirituality which refuses to

divorce private experience from public life, or personal conversion from political transformation.

Conclusion

Why would the world split open if one woman told the truth about her life? Because one woman's truth casts a light in which her sisters can see more clearly the truth of their own lives. Because one woman's courage can start a chain reaction that will draw other women out of the shadows. Because naming the truth releases energy of seismic dimensions, energy that rolls back stones and stirs up long-dormant volcanoes.

When worlds split open, walls come tumbling down. For those whose power is secured by those walls, the moment brings threat and destruction; for others, it brings freedom. For both, nothing is the same again.

All the elements of feminist spirituality are interwoven. To embrace life with passion unleashes imagination and creativity. To imagine the possibility of a future different from the present is an act of hope-filled resistance, which gives soul to the enduring struggle to change one's world and oneself. And resistance is not born out of isolation; it draws life and strength from community.

Once again, it is the poet's voice which sings most eloquently:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed
I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age,
perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.³²

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NOTES

¹ Muriel Rukeyser, quoted in Madonna Kolbenschlag, 'Feminists, the frog princess, and the new frontier of spirituality', *New Catholic World* (1982), pp 159-163.

² Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth: *In memory of her* (Crossroad, New York, 1983), p 347.

³ In Conn, (ed), *Women's spirituality: resources for Christian development* (Paulist, New York, 1986), p 3. See also Anne Carr, 'On feminist spirituality', pp 49-58 in the same volume.

⁴ *Seizing the apple: a feminist spirituality of personal growth* (Crossroad, New York, 1984).

⁵ See Conn, (ed), p 4.

⁶ Carr, in Conn, (ed), pp 53-54.

⁷ Kolbenschlag, p 160.

⁸ See Sandra Schneiders, 'The effects of women's experience on their spirituality', in Conn, (ed), *Women's spirituality*, pp 31-48.

⁹ One Washington, D.C.-based organization, the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), embodies these connections in its name.

¹⁰ Fiorenza: *In memory of her*, p 349.

¹¹ The term 'wisdom literature' is used by Kolbenschlag, p 160. On *Sophia*, see, for example, Rosemary Haughton, *The passionate God* (Paulist, New York, 1981); Fiorenza, *In memory of her*.

¹² Women in the Church conference, Washington, D.C., October 9-13, 1986, sponsored by Time Consultants, Inc.

¹³ See the essay of the same name by Harrison in her *Making the connections: essays in feminist social ethics*, ed Carol S. Robb (Beacon, Boston, 1985), pp 41-55.

¹⁴ As paraphrased by Carmody, *Seizing*, p 15.

¹⁵ Haughton, Rosemary: *The re-creation of Eve* (Templegate, Springfield, IL, 1985), vi-vii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Carmody, *op. cit.*, vii.

¹⁸ Edited by Pam McAlister (New Society, Philadelphia, 1982).

¹⁹ Radford Ruether, Rosemary: *Women-Church: theology and practice of feminist liturgical communities* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1985), pp 62, 61. See also Fiorenza, *In memory of her* and *Bread not stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Beacon, Boston, 1984).

²⁰ Haughton: *The re-creation of Eve*, p 125.

²¹ Ruether: *Women-Church*, p 4. pp 297-8 contain a listing of feminist liturgical resources.

²² See, for example, Carol Gilligan, *In a different voice* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1982); Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a new psychology of women* (Beacon, Boston, 1976).

²³ See Susan Nelson Dunfee, 'The sin of hiding', *Soundings* 65 (1982), pp 316-327; Carmody, *Seizing the apple*, pp 57-71.

²⁴ Margaret Farley, *Personal commitments: making, keeping, breaking* (Seabury, 1985); Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce tenderness* (Seabury, 1985); Harrison, *Making the connections*.

²⁵ In *The double cross: ordination, abortion and Catholic feminism* (Crossroad, New York, 1986), Denise Lardner Carmody clearly states the difficulties which many Catholic women have with the pro-abortion stance of 'secular' feminists. For Catholics, she writes, abortion is not a 'rite of passage into feminist maturity' nor 'an acceptable contraceptive' (p 9).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 13.

²⁷ Joann Wolski Conn, in Conn, (ed), *Women's spirituality*, p 23. See also Constance FitzGerald, 'Impasse and dark night', pp 287-311 in the same volume, and Mary E. Giles, 'Take back the night', in Mary E. Giles, (ed), *The feminist mystic* (Crossroad, New York, 1982), pp 36-69.

²⁸ Fiorenza: *In memory of her*, p 345.

²⁹ Wilson-Kastner, Patricia: *Faith, feminism and the Christ* (Fortress, Philadelphia, 1983), p 19.

³⁰ Weaver, Mary Jo: *New Catholic women: a contemporary challenge to traditional religious authority* (Harper & Row, San Francisco, 1985), p 181.

³¹ See Margaret Galiardi, 'Bonding: the critical praxis of feminism', *The Way* vol 26, no 2 (1986).

³² Rich, Adrienne: 'Natural resources' in *The fact of a doorframe* (W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1984), p 264.