

FEMINISM AND SPIRITUALITY: THE ROLE OF THE BIBLE IN WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY

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Introduction: the woman at the well

IN THE FOURTH CHAPTER OF JOHN'S GOSPEL, the evangelist tells the story of Jesus's encounter with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn 4, 1-42). Jesus is tired and thirsty. It is midday and he has been travelling all day. He asks the woman for a drink (v 7), a simple enough request but one which transgresses cultural barriers of gender and race. When the woman exclaims in surprise (v 9), Jesus abruptly turns his request on its head, and himself offers water for the woman to drink (v 10). Although sceptical, she attempts to understand the meaning of Jesus's offer of water, setting it within the context of her own experience.

The woman begins her search for understanding by appealing to her traditions and cultural religious experience (v 12). She has difficulty in perceiving the spiritual and symbolic nature of the water offered by Jesus. For her it is a physical gift and she cannot yet see how it relates to Jesus's revelation and gift of the Spirit (v 15). Jesus points to the symbolic meaning, therefore, by addressing the woman's life-experience (vv 16-18). He reveals to her, not her moral inadequacies, but the profound thirst for life which, 'drives her from one supposed satisfaction to another, never letting her attain the final fulfilment until she finds the water of life'.¹ It is not in sexual relationships with men that the meaning of her life is to be found, but in a renewed relationship with God through Jesus.

The woman responds, not with avoidance as is often thought, but with deep acceptance and insight (v 19).² She sees at once that the self-knowledge which Jesus offers her is profoundly spiritual. She perceives also that the real issue, in terms of her own spirituality, is that of the worship of God (v 20). Here the woman does not avoid the painful issues of her life but rather seeks to find the place in her own experience where self-knowledge and the knowledge of God meet.

Here is the point at which true spirituality begins for John: it is the moment when authentic self-love begins to emerge, arising out of, and giving rise to, the adoration of God. For the rest of the conversation the woman gropes her way to a deeper understanding of Jesus's role in God's revelation (vv 21–26). Once she attains a sufficient understanding she runs to the villagers and shares with them her faith (vv 28–30). She leaves behind her water-jar because it is now irrelevant for her purpose; she now knows, at the deepest level, that Jesus's gift is a gift of the heart. In this action, she acknowledges both her thirst for life and her recognition of Jesus as the giver of living water.

The disciples have meanwhile returned and feel outrage at Jesus's transgression of gender boundaries (v 27). From now on it is clear that they understand nothing of what has taken place. The woman, on the other hand, both understands and shares in Jesus's mission. She journeys to the village in the role of an apostle and shares with Jesus the 'harvest' of Samaritans through her evangelical witness (vv 39–42).³ She stands in marked contrast to the disciples who, through misunderstanding and gender prejudice, play no part in the apostolic harvest (vv 31–38). Self-knowledge and spiritual insight have led the woman from inner emptiness and thirst to a deep spirituality and overflowing enthusiasm for the mission of the gospel.

The bible and women's spirituality

This reading of the narrative of Jesus's encounter with the Samaritan woman speaks directly to the contribution of feminist theological and biblical insights to spirituality; in particular, it points to a feminist re-reading of the bible from a viewpoint which, whether implicitly or explicitly, challenges androcentric readings of the text.⁴ The hermeneutical debate in recent decades has shown that there is no unbiased reading of the bible, no pure form of objectivity to which the reader of the text can appeal. On the contrary, according to one New Testament writer, self-conscious subjectivity plays an important and creative role in biblical exegesis.⁵ This is an important point for spirituality which reads the bible intuitively and symbolically, entering the narratives on a subjective level as part of the experience of prayer.

Feminist readings of the bible begin with a 'hermeneutics of suspicion'.⁵ This means that, as a woman, I read the bible with woman-centred eyes, searching out the word of God within the text and critically discerning the Spirit in my faith-journey. This has

positive and negative dimensions. First, it means that I confront and name certain texts as irredeemably patriarchal and detrimental to women's spirituality. These are texts in which I perceive that the spirit of the gospel is muted, if not distorted, and which sacralize a spirituality of subservience:

Women today have the right . . . to reject passages which are hostile to women or reinterpret them because they violate their status as children of God.⁷

Secondly, it means that I read 'against the grain': that is, I read my own spirituality as a woman into texts where I and my life experience are invisible. An example of this is the way Rosemary Radford Ruether re-directs the 'prophetic-liberating traditions' of the prophets to women and women's experience of patriarchal structures of oppression.⁸ Thirdly, it means that I discover in a fresh way a large number of passages, like the story of the Samaritan woman, which speak to the heart of my spirituality as a woman. Texts such as these have been marginalized or interpreted in androcentric and even misogynist ways (compare Calvin's description of the Samaritan woman as a 'hussy' and a 'prostitute'⁹ and Raymond Brown's reference to her as 'mincing and coy').¹⁰ Texts such as these need to be drawn into the centre of my religious experience as a woman.¹¹

This approach to the text gives, in effect, a new set of priorities to the way the bible is interpreted. It takes seriously and regards positively the perspective from which I read the text as a woman. To some this may seem as if feminists are subverting scripture to an ideological perspective which is uncritically affirming of women's spirituality. Ideology of this kind, however, is a distortion and in its own way oppressive of women. What feminism is saying is that, given that it is impossible to read the bible without a perspective of some kind, it is legitimate that women read the bible afresh from the perspective of our own spirituality. In itself, this is not a new insight. The spiritual mothers and fathers of the Church—whatever their tradition—have generally recognized the need to take seriously the life experience of the individual in meditation and prayer. A feminist spirituality draws attention to the way that spiritual leaders and directors have often failed to take seriously the uniqueness of women's experience—even where they have not been actually misogynist.¹²

This last point may be spelled out further. Feminist theology argues that behind much spirituality has been a dualistic ideology

which separates soul from body, spirit from matter, the human from nature, male from female. Not only have these categories been dichotomized, they have also been set into a hierarchical relationship to each other: in each case, the former is superior to and dominant over the latter. This creates a body-matter-nature-female nexus which, in the hierarchical structure, is inferior to soul-spirit-human-male. Because of the pervasive dualism of our Western theological tradition, women have suffered from the negative effects of an Augustinian theology of sin. We have inherited, as women, a sense of shame associated with our bodies and our sexuality, which is confirmed where the Church continues to exclude us from full participation in ministry. While there are elements of this kind of dualistic thinking in scripture, however, it is generally alien to the Hebrew mind. The bible is undeniably androcentric, and patriarchal at a number of points, but (unlike many of its later interpreters) it generally resists a full-blown dualism.¹³ According to feminist theologians, it is this dualism as much as anything which lies at the basis of women's oppression and low self-esteem.¹⁴

Feminist spirituality begins, therefore, in an acute sensitivity to the negative effects of dualistic thinking on our experience of the divine. When we approach the bible in the context of prayer, we come as women who long to find a deep sense of acceptance and self-understanding before God. We come yearning to 'resolve the split between self and other in Christian spirituality',¹⁵ and to find in God's word a spirituality which replaces dualism with the reconciliation and mutuality that is at the heart of the Trinity.¹⁶ In order to achieve this, we need to recover a biblical theology which affirms that, in partnership with men, we are created in the divine image (Gen 1, 26-27) and redeemed and baptized into Christ (Gal 3, 27-28). Only a prayerful and discerning reading of the bible can enable us as women to celebrate ourselves as made in God's image and re-made in the image of Christ. I am not speaking here on an ideological level. It is a question of the suffering of women who, through dualistic modes, have been taught to under-value the very self that God esteems and loves, body and soul. Spirituality from a feminist perspective begins with a holistic affirmation of women: an affirmation of heart, mind and body.

At the same time, a feminist spirituality does not need and indeed ought not to be uncritically affirming of women. The challenging dimension of the gospel is as necessary for us in our experience as it is for men. The bible uses the language of judgement to describe this

dimension and it is often misunderstood. Judgement is fundamentally the gracious and loving assessment of God who challenges and purifies the heart through prayer. Like men, women need to hear with the ears of faith the word of God which is 'living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow . . .' (Heb 4, 12 NRSV).

Feminist theologians are clear, however, that the challenge of the gospel for women is not necessarily the same as it is for men. A woman's theological understanding of sin, for example, speaks not so much of pride, self-assertion, and the need for self-denial, but rather of the sin of self-doubt, timidity, and the need for a strong and loving sense of self before God and others.¹⁷

A feminist critical re-reading of the bible can thus open the bible to our experience as women, enabling it to function as word of God for us in a fresh and vital way. It is able to nurture our faith and our unique experience of God, by affirming and challenging us. The story of the Samaritan woman is an example of a text which reveals both dimensions of the spiritual journey and encourages us as readers of the text to identify with her struggle. The narrative affirms an unnamed woman, who, unlike Nicodemus in the preceding chapter of John's Gospel, has neither name, status, power nor theological qualifications in her favour.¹⁸ We too are women without name in patriarchal culture; we too are affirmed in the narrative over against the male theological establishment. The woman's gender, race and personal lifestyle unite to make her a nonentity, a non-being, just as it does for many women in our society today. Jesus, however, takes seriously her humanity as he does ours. He affirms her, and our, developing insights and facilitates us in the journey of self-discovery. Precisely at those points where a patriarchal and religious establishment deems her and us unworthy, Jesus affirms our worth. At other points, however, Jesus challenges us. He challenges (without rejection) aspects of our religious experience. He challenges our lifestyle, not as we have seen on moralistic grounds, but on the grounds that too often we pursue the meaning of our lives in patriarchal relationships. Thus through a sympathetic and woman-centred reading of the text, we encounter the Jesus who, out of the dead structures of the past, offers us life and an authentic female spirituality.

The re-naming of God

So far I have spoken of the way in which women, as embodied yet spiritual beings, are able to read the bible in the context of subjective

experience. A further dimension to this, raised by feminist theologians, is the question of how we as women are to name God, particularly in the context of prayer. Theologically, the Church has always been aware that God is not male, even though it has continued to name the Trinity with exclusively male images and pronouns. Feminist theology finds the contradiction between form and substance disturbing. In terms of spirituality, on the affective level, this is demeaning to women. Images and metaphors are not decorative elements added to truth; they contain meaning within themselves. To image God in exclusively male terms, and to name God with exclusively male pronouns, shapes the response of the heart to God. On an intuitive level—whatever I am taught on the cerebral level—I *experience* God as male.

Thus the naming of God, like all our theology, stands in need of redemption. We need to learn to re-name God in order to affirm the divine image within ourselves as women and our mystical incorporation into Christ through baptism. We need to understand that

a healthy spirituality requires a healing of the imagination which will allow us not only to think differently about God but to experience God differently.¹⁹

Moreover, in theological terms, the re-naming of God is a way of affirming the mystery of God, safeguarding us against the idolatry of absolutizing any one image or theological conception of God. It safeguards us also against idolizing the male. Spirituality means encountering the mystery of God in a way that undercuts our human tendency to domesticate God. A feminist re-naming of God in the context of prayer opens us to the mystery and otherness of the divine presence.²⁰

Once again, the bible plays an important role in the process of re-naming God as a way of reflecting and also nurturing women's spirituality.²¹ Biblical imagery for God is overwhelmingly male. A 'hermeneutics of suspicion' encourages women to confront the reality of scripture in this regard, recognizing that the text arises out of specific contexts with all their strengths and limitations. The re-naming of God in women's spiritual experience begins by recognizing and respecting the ancient nature of the biblical text. At the same time, the bible offers for women a number of starting-points for the re-naming of God.²² First, it does so by example, presenting the community of faith at various points in its history struggling to re-name God in the light of the new thing that God has done. Again and

again throughout the Old and New Testaments, God is revealed in new ways. The traditions of the past are not so much discarded as re-interpreted in the light of the new. Women are challenged to engage in the same process: the same dynamic of embracing and renewing the traditions of the past. The One who is, on the one hand, 'the same yesterday and today and forever' (Heb 13, 8) is also the One who is revealed anew to each generation.

Secondly, the bible itself offers a range of female images which provide the basis for our re-naming of God.²³ The first of these is that of Sophia or Lady Wisdom. Sophia is found primarily in the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament and intertestamental period, but is also strikingly present in the New Testament. Sophia in Wisdom literature is clearly not just a personification but also a manifestation of God:

in certain texts, Sophia is in reality God herself in her activity in the world, God imaged as a female acting subject.²⁴

This is carried over into the New Testament where Jesus is presented as either the messenger or the incarnate presence of Sophia—God.²⁵ Sophia is presented as hostess at a banquet, generously calling all to share her divine and lavish hospitality (Prov 9, 1-6; Sir 24, 19-21; cf Jn 6, 35. 51-53). She summons people to her easy yoke, graciously comforting them and giving meaning and direction to their lives (Mt 11, 28-30; Sir 51, 26-27). She appeals to those who are poor and hungry, lovingly nurturing them and satisfying their deepest yearnings. More than any other picture, Sophia embodies the female face of God within scripture. Her divine characteristics make her a dynamic resource for women's spirituality.²⁶

In addition to Sophia, mothering images are used of God in the Old Testament; giving birth, breast-feeding and nurturing (e.g. Job 10, 10-11; Hos 11, 3-4; Isai 42, 14; 66, 13). Similarly, female imagery is found in the New Testament. The image of birth lies at the basis, for example, of Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus in John 3 where it is used of the divine Spirit who mysteriously gives birth to believers as God's children. Mothering images are used of Jesus—as, for example, in Jesus's lament over Jerusalem which represents an old tradition behind the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (Mt 23, 37/Lk 13, 34). Other images are also used of God, such as Housekeeper (Lk 15, 3-7) and Bakerwoman (Mt 13, 33/Lk 13, 20-21). Strangely enough in these two parables the link between God and the woman at the centre of the story is seldom made—unlike parables which have a

male protagonist.²⁷ Where such marginalized texts are used in prayer and reflection, they are fruitful sources for the re-naming of God in the context of life-experience. Indeed they have the capacity to nurture men's spiritual experience as well as that of women.

Conclusion: prayer as dialogue

The model which is most helpful for our understanding of the bible and spirituality from a feminist perspective is that of dialogue.²⁸ Prayer is a dialogue between myself and God—whether or not any words are spoken—in which I struggle to communicate my deepest self to God and open myself to God's self-communication. The bible plays a key role in this communication of the heart: it is the channel that facilitates both self-knowledge and the intuitive knowledge of God. When the bible is used in this way, as a major source for prayer rather than a textbook of theology or a guarantor of truth, it speaks across the centuries to women's life-experience in mutual and creative dialogue. Feminist theologians are concerned to assert that biblical theology needs to begin in human experience and not discount or dismiss it: 'The authority of women's experience . . . is a norm for the truthfulness of the tradition'.²⁹ An authentic and biblical spirituality for women, therefore, needs to begin with experience—our particular experience as women in a patriarchal church and world, and our unique experience as human beings.

Such an approach to spirituality and meditation which begins in life-experience does not imply that our experience as women is the *sole* arbiter of authority. Feminist theology needs to be aware of the dangers of 'religious enthusiasm', a phenomenon which has dogged certain forms of Protestantism and which degenerates into religious and ideological fanaticism. For this reason, it needs to maintain the integrity of the bible as the other partner in dialogue. As we have already seen, spirituality is not concerned with an uncritical affirmation of women's experience. Women's spiritual experience certainly critiques the bible, but at the same time it also paradoxically opens itself to the critique of the bible. Feminist theology and spirituality which ignores the critical role and authority of the bible for women's experience creates a new form of hegemony and makes an idol of our female experience. The role of discernment in spiritual formation is another way of speaking about these competing authorities. Through prayer and reflection women discern the living truth of the bible and the living truth about ourselves. Each has its own integrity and its own authority.

Feminist spirituality, therefore, has an important challenge to make within the context of traditional Christian spirituality. Its fundamental challenge is to the reading of scripture and the question of how the biblical text is to be interpreted in the modern context. The hermeneutical model which is most creative is that of partnership in which the bible interacts in dialogue with women's experience. Feminist spirituality begins in a biblical and theological affirmation of our bodily experience and our creative human power. Out of this affirmation arises the authenticity of prayer which, like a spring of water, brings strength and growth. A feminist perspective on spirituality is

a reclaiming of female power beginning with the likeness of women to the divine, the rehabilitation of the bodily as the very locus of that divine likeness, and the right of women to participate in the shaping of religion and culture.³⁰

Such a spirituality for women involves, not the rejection of biblical religion—any more than the rejection of tradition—but rather an imaginative and radical re-reading of the text. The bible becomes the well at which women are invited to drink living water. In interaction with our lived experience as women, the water of the well quenches our thirst for life, nurtures in us an honest and vibrant spirituality, and draws us deeper into the mothering embrace of the Trinity.

NOTES

¹ Bultmann, Rudolf: *The Gospel of John; a commentary* (Oxford, 1971), p 188 (slightly adapted).

² O'Day, Gail R.: *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel. Narrative mode and theological claim* (Philadelphia, 1986), pp 69–70.

³ Cf Okure, Teresa: *The Johannine approach to mission. A contextual study of John 4: 1–42* (Tübingen, 1988), pp 168–181, and Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth: *In memory of her. A feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins* (New York, 1983), p 327.

⁴ For a brief summary of the variety of feminist approaches to the bible, cf Doob Sakenfield, Katharine: 'Feminist perspectives on bible and theology. An introduction to selected issues and literature' *Interpretation* vol 42 (1988), pp 5–18.

⁵ Schüssler Fiorenza, *op. cit.*, pp xiii–xxv, 26–36.

⁶ Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth: *Bread not stone. The challenge of feminist biblical interpretation* (Edinburgh, 1984), pp 15–18.

⁷ Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth: *A land flowing with milk and honey. Perspectives on feminist theology* (London, 1986), p 200.

⁸ Radford Ruether, Rosemary: *Sexism and God-talk. Towards a feminist theology* (Boston, 1983), pp 22–33, 61–66.

⁹ Calvin, John: *The Gospel according to St John: part 1* (Grand Rapids, 1959), p 90.

¹⁰ Brown, Raymond E.: *The Gospel according to John* vol 1 (New York, 1966), p 175.

¹¹ Schüssler Fiorenza, *op. cit.*, pp 18–19, names this a ‘hermeneutics of proclamation’.

¹² This is not to deny the importance of women mystics and theologians in Western spiritual tradition. On the contrary, feminist spirituality is concerned to undo their marginalized status in the tradition.

¹³ On this Aristotelian form of dualism and its relationship to the ‘household codes’ of the New Testament, see Schüssler Fiorenza, *op. cit.*, pp 70–85.

¹⁴ Halkes, Catharina: ‘Feminism and spirituality’, *Spirituality today* vol 40 (1988), pp 22–36; cf Schneiders, Sandra M.: *Beyond patching. Faith and feminism in the Catholic Church* (New York, 1991), pp 74–81.

¹⁵ Fischer, Kathleen: *Women at the well. Feminist perspectives on spiritual direction* (London, 1988), p 39.

¹⁶ On this, cf Wilson-Kastner, Patricia; *Faith, feminism and the Christ* (Philadelphia, 1983), pp 121–137.

¹⁷ See Saiving, Valerie: ‘The human situation: a feminist view’, in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (eds) *Woman-spirit rising. A feminist reader in religion* (San Francisco, 1979), pp 25–42. Saiving defines women’s sinful tendencies as ‘triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason—in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self’ (p 37).

¹⁸ Pazdan, Margaret, M.: ‘Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman: contrasting models of discipleship’, *Biblical theology bulletin* vol 17 (1987), pp 145–148.

¹⁹ Schneiders, Sandra M.: *Women and the word. The gender of God in the New Testament and the spirituality of women* (New York, 1986), p 19.

²⁰ Johnson, Elizabeth A.: ‘The incomprehensibility of God and the image of God male and female’, in Wolski Conn, Joann (ed): *Women’s spirituality: resources for Christian development* (New York, 1986), pp 243–260, especially pp 243–247.

²¹ Not all feminist spirituality takes this view. For some feminist writers, the bible and Judaeo-Christian tradition have nothing to offer women. A number of these post-Christian feminists have turned to the notion of ‘Goddess’ for the source of women’s spirituality. Broadly speaking, this is a shift in emphasis from God as revealed in history to Goddess revealed in the cycles of nature. Cf, for example, Christ, Carol P.: *Laughter of Aphrodite. Reflection on a journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco, 1987).

²² See Schneiders, *op. cit.*, pp 20–49.

²³ On this point, cf Mollenkott, Virginia R.: *The divine feminine: the biblical imagery of God as female* (New York, 1983).

²⁴ Johnson, Elizabeth A.: ‘Jesus, the Wisdom of God: a biblical basis for non-androcentric Christology’, *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* vol 61 (1985), p 275; cf also pp 271–276.

²⁵ Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp 276–289.

²⁶ Further on this, see Susan Cady, Marian Ronan, and Hal Taussig: *Sophia: the future of feminist spirituality* (New York, 1986), especially pp 76–93.

²⁷ So Schneiders, *op. cit.*, pp 38–40.

²⁸ Many of the points made in this discussion concerning the role of scripture can be applied equally to tradition. Feminist theology sees its relationship with the traditions of the Church in the same way: a critical and interactive dialogue arising out of women’s experience.

²⁹ Fischer: *op. cit.*, p 6. Fischer is speaking of tradition rather than the bible, but they are closely parallel in feminist critical reflection.

³⁰ Schneiders: *Beyond patching*, pp 80–81.