

WOMEN RELIGIOUS AND CHRISTIAN FEMINISM

By JILL ROBSON

The following text is the result of several conversations and a continuing dialogue between two women friends, one a lay person and the other a religious sister.

FEMINISTS HAVE SAID 'The personal is political'.¹ Christian feminists have underlined this by saying 'The personal is theological'.² Therefore in this piece, which is my contribution to a dialogue between a woman religious and one of her feminist secular sisters, I want to start from the datum of my own experience. For the questions which I want to pose women religious do indeed come out of the dialogue between my own experience and the challenge feminism has presented me with. As I started to think about the questions I wanted to explore I became increasingly aware that my contact with 'nuns' had been a very formative and positive part of my own journey into feminism.

Religious sisters

About twelve years ago I came to be aware that feminist ideas were beginning to filter through into my consciousness and to take root. All that the feminist critique was saying about women's experience of marginalization, domination and subjugation made the most enormous sense. At last it felt as if here were people who were talking about my life in the same terms in which I experienced it, rather than trying to shove my experience into an arbitrary set of boxes and hand it back to me, neatly and tidily prepackaged, telling me this was how it really was, as so many men had done previously. For some time my slowly germinating feminism existed in a rather separate compartment of my thinking from my Christianity. Then I met a group of Christian feminists and suddenly the light and sun poured into both these areas and my feminism grew, put out leaves, branches, and blossomed, almost overnight.

There was just such a sense of rightness about it, as if the soil had been carefully tilled and prepared for just these sorts of ideas to take root and flourish. There were all the feelings of 'Yes, of course, this makes sense'. It was only some time later that I realized just how much this reaction was due to my experience of nuns, those women who had taught me at school and whom I had had among my friends, mentors and guides ever since.

It was from the nuns at school that I had seen and internalized role models of how to be an independent woman with authority. For they ran the school and taught in it, looked after the buildings, the garden, the food, travelled around the world and went to university, all without the help, assistance or interference of men. I particularly remember my headmistress who was always fair, was (sometimes) surprisingly kind, and had an unexpected twinkle in her eye, but before whom the plumber, the school inspector and the girls' fathers all quietly quailed and went in awe. She was very much a woman, but equally no one would have ever doubted her authority. There was for me something else very important about these religious sisters which was that I experienced them as genuinely attempting to put the gospel into practice in the details of their daily lives. They took the gospel seriously and attempted to *act* on it. This action was what had struck me most forcibly about them when I first went to the convent school as a new girl in the Lower Fourth. (At the time I was a 'non-Catholic'.) I had never been taught by nuns before and I was somewhat afraid of them. But my first reaction was that here were people trying to live out the gospel in a much more radical way than I had ever experienced before.

At that time I was not aware of the difference between the practical autonomy with which these women acted and the constrained and dependent nature of the lives of many of the other women around me. I seem to remember that by and large my friends and I were rather sorry for them because they had not got married. Although, to be fair, I was myself attracted to the contemplative religious life, for I had very much fallen in love with God and wanted to make a complete, and I suppose rather romantic, gesture of giving myself to him entirely. That did not happen for a variety of reasons, one of them being the extremely negative and restrictive attitude and actions of my father. (He forbade me from becoming a Catholic at 17 years making me wait until I was 21 years old; religious life had to wait until two years

after that.) In the event I met a flesh-and-blood romantic young man and fell in love with him and married him, thereby greatly pleasing my father and mother. Dreams of being a nun disappeared under the pressure of giving him his dinner on time every night and soon in keeping ahead of piles of nappies. I slowly became engulfed in toddlers and torpor. I found myself well and truly trapped, miserable and alienated.

Thus I was depressed and stuck in the classic position of powerless wife-and-mother-of-three-toddlers.³ It was the love and encouragement of two women which helped me out of that miry pit. One was a woman psychotherapist, a doctor, a professional woman, a woman active in the world of men. The other, and by far the most powerful, was an elderly Carmelite nun who had not left her enclosure for forty years, and whom I saw perhaps twice a year. But we wrote. That woman loved me as a mother in God in the way no one else had ever done before. She more than anyone else gave me back my sense of self-worth and my dignity as a woman. She showed me a way of true courage in how to love God in the adverse circumstances of daily life. Real practical loving, not silly and inhuman self-sacrifice. She was one of the kindest and most truly human beings I have ever known. And always down to earth and practical.

When Christian feminism showed me both the analysis of the mechanisms of oppression and of patriarchy I was ready to recognize them in the particulars of my own life. When it showed me a vision of women radically believing the gospel and living it out in their own lives despite the pressures of patriarchy, I realized I had already known women like that; inside me there were already role models ready to pick up and live my way into. As I re-examined the familiar tales of women saints, with eyes newly opened, I saw that there had always been a procession of radical women who loved God in an uncompromising way and were, if necessary, prepared to fight those men in authority for the fulfilment of their vision. I already knew their stories and they were in my bloodstream, whether Teresa of Avila, Joan of Arc, Catherine of Siena or even the 'Little Flower'. Suddenly I realized I could join their company in another and much more exciting way. They were for me role models of how it was possible to be true to myself and a woman before God. As feminist scholarship began to unearth the stories of the Desert Mothers,⁴ and began to tell the radical statements about women which historically the foundresses of many

orders had made,⁵ I rejoiced and felt heartened by their presence in the Communion of Saints. I found their stories a real practical encouragement that something tangible and liveable could be achieved.

In more recent years my feminism has deepened and touched more and more areas of my life, challenging me to examine things I would have preferred to have left unquestioned, and then goading me to act. During this time it has been the affirmation, the clarity and encouragement of those of my friends who are religious sisters which has been one of the really important living links which has kept me hopeful and believing that maybe it is possible to love God, be an honest feminist and stay in the Church. It is from this basis of very positive feelings about, and experience of, women religious that I want to pose some questions which I think feminism is addressing to the religious life.

The feminist challenge

Feminism challenges women and men to open their eyes to recognize the widespread workings of patriarchy and its injustice. The task is to see, to analyze, to understand and then to act. Further reflections on these actions will then take place and affect the understanding and the analysis. (Feminism works on the action-reflection model as does much liberation theology.) The first task of recognition is perhaps the hardest because, as women, we have taken in with our mother's milk so many of patriarchy's assumptions as normative, and just accepted that this is the way the world is. We have internalized the oppression and learnt to live with it. Very often we had precious little choice. Therefore, the whole business of having your consciousness raised is a very painful one, and the closer it comes to home the more painful it is. As a married woman it is not at all comfortable to discover that the institution of marriage to which you have wholeheartedly devoted all your love, energy and made central to your whole existence for twenty years is, in fact, a patriarchal institution that works much better for men than for women.⁶ Similarly, I imagine it must be pretty shaking to realize that the structures of the Church, the ethos, the Rule and many of the assumptions of a committed life are ones that have been handed down, or encouraged, or framed by men, for women to live by.

Now, I am not suggesting that marriage and the committed religious life be abandoned because they are shot through with

patriarchal assumptions. I believe that deep commitment to another human being, or to God, which is lived out is a fundamental human desire and can be a good, fruitful and a truly humanizing experience for all concerned. But we are all having to struggle to achieve that blessed state. In the meanwhile a little analysis is needed. Marriage and religious life have often been represented to women as radically different alternatives and the details of the life set out in contradistinction one to the other. I am increasingly coming to think that many of the internalized attitudes that sustain one also sustain the other. I suspect that many of the root problems are rather similar for both, although they come wearing different guises.

In what follows I would like to point to some of the *structures* of religious life that as a feminist it seems to me stand in need of analysis. I believe that the detailed task of analysis must be done by the women whom it most concerns, religious sisters themselves.

The problem of pedestals

Religious life is (still) presented to the laity as rather special and a way of perfection (think of all those prayers for the increase of vocations to the priesthood and religious life). Also it is characterized as a life of service to others. These attitudes have the effect of placing those living that life on a pedestal, and the problem of living on a pedestal is that it is very difficult to get off it, for (it has to be admitted) it has certain perks; people look up to you, treat you with respect etc. The effect of all of this can be that it is very difficult for pedestal dwellers to admit to their own weakness, inadequacies, shortcomings, fears, failings and vulnerabilities, and that they find life as problematic as the rest of us. This problem is not unique to religious; all the helping professions suffer from it. But it is a ploy of patriarchy to make us *individually* believe that we are weak and inadequate. (If *I* am having problems, then *I* will need help, or perhaps *I* can just quietly endure it and no one will notice.) Thus women suffer in isolation and do not band together to criticize the basic premises. Namely that to be human is to be weak and vulnerable and failing and fearful, and that admitting to this publicly is the beginning of wisdom and of finding new strength. When claimed, that strength can be used to fight together against the structures of oppression which produce much of the suffering. Also the iconoclastic activity of climbing down off a pedestal is a very liberating one for everyone else because it helps

them realize that there is not a form of life that is 'better' than the one they themselves are struggling with.

The problem of pedestals is not limited to women religious. 'Wives and mothers' have all too often also been placed on pedestals, and feminism has done much to challenge the unrealistic and self-destructive ideals which have been so set up for most normal human women to fall short of, or which have been used as a way of keeping the real flesh-and-blood women at bay. It is much easier to keep your wife on a pedestal and do things 'for her', but really the way you want it, than it is to engage with her real self in all its glorious inconsistency and vulnerability.

The deeper challenge here is the articulation of a theology of humankind that builds on the totality of human experience not just that which half the human race, and then only the educated and successful members of that half, have formulated as being normative of their experience. A theology that takes more account of failings, brokenness and shortcomings as a source of strength must surely be one that is in line with the gospel. The problem is that we have taken patriarchy's criteria for success to heart and not the gospel criteria. Even as women we have difficulty in hanging on to the truth that our strength does lie in acknowledging weakness.

Emotional dependence/immaturity

It seems to me, from my close observation of numerous sisters and from all I have learnt as a Catholic psychologist, that the structures of religious life, especially for women, encourage emotional dependency and immaturity and in many cases positively militate against women growing up and becoming psychologically and spiritually fully adult. Now in this respect there are many parallels between the constraining effects of ideas and ideals about patriarchal marriage and about religious life. In both cases many young women have entered religious life, or marriage, either straight from school (for religious, often a convent school), or after a relatively short period of work or of training. (I am aware that patterns are changing.) There is a certain amount of compliance and obedience needed to enter community life and live inside it, just as marriage needs a degree of toleration and compromise. But while it is true that many married women have also been encouraged, or constrained, to remain emotionally dependent and immature, not taking full responsibility for themselves and often woefully lacking in self-confidence, yet there is at the heart of marriage an

idea of mutuality of power and of the importance of negotiation and discussion. Now, often this ideal does not happen and women become trapped and subservient. The mechanisms, both social and psychological by which this comes about have been extensively analysed by feminist writers and the processes challenged.⁷

As a secular sister I am not in the position to analyse the mechanisms by which the processes of stultification of growth into full adult psychological autonomy happen in religious life. I can just observe that it does happen. I was recently forcibly struck by the phenomenon.

Twenty five years ago there were three Catholic nurses, they were great friends. After their training one became a religious nursing sister. The other two married, had babies, were shaken by illness, divorce, return to study, house ownership and all the exigencies of life earning their own livings. They both kept in touch with each other and with their friend, despite the restrictions on letters, visits, etc. Recently they all three met for a day, all talked and shared with enjoyment. To the astonishment of the two lay women it appeared as if their friend had spent the last twenty-five years in aspic. She was almost exactly the same as when she entered religious life, in her attitudes, her understanding, her opinions and even still telling the same funny stories. It was as if she had indeed lived those extra years but had been utterly untouched by them, either psychologically or theologically. It may be that she had grown deeply in wisdom in relation to religious life, but if so it was in no way visible.

From all that I have heard from my colleagues in the Catholic Psychology Group who work therapeutically with religious I know that this is not an isolated phenomenon. I would suggest that there are attitudes, ideals and structures in religious life which encourage the lack of growth. I believe they stand in need of public analysis by those women who are living within those structures. For such religious women with insight and learning obviously exist, because, as I have said earlier, religious life does not necessarily produce subservient 'yes' women ('Yes Mother'/'Yes Dear') any more than marriage does. There are still some splendid latter-day Desert Mothers about.

The bodily challenge

I suspect that some women enter religious life in order to escape from the challenge of a single one-to-one intimate relationship,

and, also, as a way of side-stepping the pressure of what to do with their sexuality. I *know* many women have entered marriage in order to escape from the challenge of being single and lonely, and, also, as an acceptable and 'respectable' way of dealing with the pressure of their sexuality. For many women the realities of intimacy, sexual and maternal, have brought them deeply into contact with the physicality of their bodily selves, and those of the ones they love, care for, and live with, in an uncompromising manner. In their bodies they have done a lot of learning and come to a deep level of knowing. One of the things they have come to know is that women's and men's being is deeply rooted in their bodiliness.

Christian feminists have reflected on this at length and marvelled how patriarchy has attempted to cut women off from the insight, and knowing, of their own bodies, and how especially ironic that is in an incarnational religion like Christianity. For them there has been an increasing awareness that sexuality and spirituality can not, must not, be separated from each other. The deeply, truly incarnational, bodily aspect of woman's experience, and of her way to God, also has increasingly shown them that they must be concerned about what happens to the bodies of other women, for instance those sexually abused, used for pornography, raped, exploited through prostitution or subjected to invasive medical technology.

I know that for many religious sisters the choice of celibacy is a radical *sexual* choice. Fine, I respect that and I want to hear more of how that illuminates what it is to be a *woman* before God, especially a feminist woman before God. But I can see that some sisters have made the choice of celibacy as an escapist *asexual* choice. And I suspect that the structures of religious life, and the rhetoric which supports it, have colluded with that antibody stance. I would like to see these structures, mechanisms and the underlying theological assumptions more fully explored and analysed by religious. Because attitudes to sexuality and celibacy affect everyone in the Church, religious and lay, married and virgins, through the way that the theology and Church teaching is formulated and promulgated, and the way that young people's religious formation takes place.

I would suggest that the choice of celibacy for sisters does not mean that they can be indifferent, or unaffected, by what happens to the bodies of other women. As a married woman I have known

that the goodness, God-giveness and deep spirituality of my sexual relationship has been affirmed, endorsed and validated by the choice of celibacy that some of my sisters have made. As celibate women, I hope, my sisters know that their freedom from sexual harassment and exploitation partly gains its full force and meaning through the abused and exploited fate of the bodies of other women. I think that the feminist challenge of facing up to the necessity of our solidarity with other women, over the issue of what happens to women's bodies, is being offered to religious as much as to other women. I have no idea what the appropriate response is today. Except that I am quite sure it is not setting up new orders of Magdalens, where 'fallen women' who have 'reformed' are allowed to become second class nuns leading lives of penance. That must be to collude with the patriarchal view of women's bodies and to set the pure virgin against her fallen sister, to divide women from women.

Life-style

The women's movement, along with other radical philosophies, is challenging our Western consumerism and the way that we live on this planet. Women are concerned about life-style, ecology, peace, world poverty, animal rights, vegetarianism, alternative medicine etc. Here is a whole cluster of real and important issues about 'how *do* we live on a day-to-day basis in ways that are just?' It is a slow and halting attempt to try and combat the effects of structural sin. Needless to say most of us women are being less than consistent and wholehearted about it; such is human nature.

Religious life has always had an alternative lifestyle as a central part of the deal: a life of vowed poverty. In some cases this has been much more spoken of than real. In the last twenty years or so there has been an increasing realization that poverty does not just mean personal poverty. Not owning anything oneself, while belonging to a rich order which owns large amounts of real estate and has a healthy annual income, is hardly poverty in the way those on Family Income Supplement would recognize it. Belonging to a community who will nurse you in your infirm and incontinent old age is not the poverty and isolation of being in a public geriatric ward with no relatives to visit you or care about you. Also there has been the realization that the structures and organization of religious life have been unnecessarily 'holy' and self-conscious,

forming a stumbling block to the laity, not to mention an impediment to the true humanity of religious themselves. Consequently there has been a great liberation and liberalization of religious life. Gone are white-washed austere convents, with prim parlours and nuns in quasi-medieval habits. Alleluia! But now often convents are almost indistinguishable from the comfortable middle-class homes of the more affluent laity.

For myself, I have long struggled with trying to live out an appropriate lifestyle with relation to money, possessions, use of resources, heat, light, food and luxury. I want to affirm the goodness of the material creation and to enjoy it as celebration of our bodily goodness. I also want to be in solidarity with my third world sisters and brothers. And I want to preserve the planet for further generations of my great-great-great-granddaughters and their daughters. I am struggling. I would dearly like to have my religious sisters mark out the paths for me. Whereas I sometimes feel as if, some of them at least, are being seduced by the sirens of late twentieth-century consumerism. Wherein does holy poverty lie in our age?

Conclusion

In exploring these questions I want to make two things clear. Firstly my religious sisters have already shown me a great many important things about what it is to be a woman. Secondly I know that there are all sorts of things that they know and have learnt that I also need to hear from them. I guess the root question I am asking them now is whether they will come out into the open and engage in the task of feminist analysis and dialogue.

For it seems to me that it is the task of analysis, of naming processes, that is crucial at the present moment. The analysis of the structures of patriarchy in religious life can only be done by religious sisters themselves, they are the only ones who really know it from the inside. I believe that the analysis should be presented in the public domain and not just done for home consumption behind closed convent doors. Of course I realize that this is to run the risk that you will find yourselves on the wrong side of those doors with them closed against you. Secular sisters have taken that risk and have on occasions found themselves on the outside with the doors shut. Even the most consciousness-raised Christian feminist sometimes finds herself wishing she was back in the fleshpots of Egypt, or just the 'little woman' again. But it would appear that

the inevitable cost of an exodus, a liberation from slavery, is a period of wandering in the wilderness. The root question Christian feminists are addressing to their religious sisters is 'Are you going to come out and join us in the wilderness?'

NOTES

¹ Carol Hanisch, see Lisa Tuttle, 'The personal is political' in *Encyclopedia of feminism* (London, 1987).

² Robson, p 121, 'Mary, my sister' in Furlong, Monica (Ed): *Feminine in the Church*, (London, 1984).

³ There is a large psychological/sociological literature which shows how depression frequently occurs in young mothers who have toddlers, are housebound, do not work, who have poor relationships with their husbands and no confiding friendships: cf Brown, G. W., Ni Bhrolchain, M. and Harris T., 'Social class and psychiatric disturbance among women in an urban population', *Sociology*, 9, (1975), pp 225-254.

⁴ See, for instance, Rosemary Ruether & Eleanor McLaughlin (eds) *Women of Spirit* (New York, 1979) and Elizabeth Petroff, *Consolation of the Blessed* (New York, 1979).

⁵ For example, Mary Ward as a very English example of a foundress with a vision of women way ahead of her time.

⁶ For example numerous studies of psychological health have shown that married men are better psychologically adjusted than married women or single men, but single women come out as being in best psychological health, cf Bebbington *et al* (1981) 'Epidemiology of mental disorders', in Camberwell *Psychological Medicine*, 11, pp 561-579.

⁷ See for instance the writings of Luise Eichenbaum & Susie Orbach, *Outside in, inside out: Women's psychology* (London, Pelican 1982) and *What do women want?* (London, 1984).

A REPLY

By LAVINIA BYRNE

In the last half of her article Jill Robson discusses emotional dependence, the bodily challenge and life-style. Once the article was completed she commented that she had unwittingly been writing about obedience, chastity and poverty. Feminism asks sisters to reflect openly on what lies at the heart of their vowed commitment because, as I see it, and as her article has reminded us, 'the personal is both political and theological'. Feminism asks religious women to take both politics and theology seriously. Otherwise we have only ourselves to blame if they are constructed independently of us.

There are questions which feminism addresses to the religious life, but equally there are questions which the religious life addresses to feminism. I recognize and am challenged by the points feminism raises. We must break the conspiracy of silence which separates woman from woman, secular from religious sisters. I am using this opportunity to respond to Dr Robson both by picking up specific points she has made, and equally by inviting her to reflect on some of the questions which preoccupy me as a woman religious.

Politics and the communal

'The personal is both political and theological' but what about the collective? Is that not political and theological as well? A year ago, the British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, was interviewed by a popular woman's magazine. 'There is no such thing as society', she proclaimed. This view gave priority to the family and, in the context in which she was speaking, that makes some sense of her claim. But in itself it is terrifying, and religious communities should find it deeply threatening. After all they are attempting to model a new way of making community within society and cannot pretend to be equipped to live as families. Are we left only with the individual? The concern expressed in the pages of all the books which have been written on social spirituality over the past ten years gives me hope. As Jill Robson demonstrates, feminist theology is part of liberation theology. It shares wider concerns than its own particular brief. It has demonstrated that the liberation of society is as important as the liberation of individuals or individual groups.

So I want to know what women who live together in religious community have to say to feminism and what feminist women who have moved out of conventional or even patriarchal relationships have to say to religious. After all we share a common quest. Contemporary British culture is not alone in telling us there is no such thing as society, that the individual is all. We should not be surprised at the rise both of individualism in religious communities (which are traditionally rather conservative—with a few honourable exceptions) and of a kind of naive collectivism in certain women's groups. I have been maddened by the unspoken and unquestioning assumptions about the place of the police or of peaceful protest which I have heard in religious communities, but equally I had to stop taking my bicycle for repairs to a women's shop called Moon Cycles. This clever name concealed the very worst in collective

enterprises. Endless communal discussion preceded every task. Where religious women—who may or may not be feminists—and their secular counterparts talk to each other it may be possible to warn each other of the pitfalls, either of excessive individualism or of naive bonding.

At their best religious communities are places where individual women are invited to differentiate. This understanding is based in a time-honoured image for Christian community, the body. Science teaches us that the embryo consists at first of undifferentiated cells. But very soon they learn to specialize. Nerves become nerves, bone becomes bone. The differentiated cell can go on to support and sustain and work with all the others through childhood, adulthood and on to old age. It has a specific function and the capacity to fulfill this function. Time spent in a religious novitiate is embryonic time, where the novice puts her hand to most tasks. Subsequently she will be encouraged to develop more personal skills and given appropriate training. In the novitiate she learns to put the interests of the whole body before her own. She will then learn that harmony and balance lie in integrating the individual and the collective, in differentiating from the group while continuing to form an integral part of it.

Where feminism falls down, it seems to me, is where this differentiation is not allowed to take place. If all tasks are approached with equal solemnity and all call forth an equal measure of collaboration, no progress is made. Bonding becomes a tyranny. Feminists, as other women, have to face the call to emotional maturity which is outlined in the first half of this article.

Theology and our status before God

I go to an unlikely source to make my next point. But the Vatican's document on *The pastoral care of homosexual persons* illustrates what I mean: 'Every person has a fundamental identity: the creature of God, and by his grace, his child and heir to eternal life' (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons*, n 16).

Feminism, at least in Britain, has middle-class overtones. While it speaks persuasively about the rights of women, its starting point is liberal protest at a sense of oppression, rather than the value and dignity of women's fundamental identity before God. This dilemma is particularly acute for Christian feminists, many of the

most articulate of whom are Anglicans. Their primary problems lie in the provenance of their entire theology of the human person, whether male or female. Its roots are deeply Calvinistic; its image of God is deeply patriarchal.

The Catholic Church, on the other hand, has always tried to offer a vision to women. In certain respects this vision is alien, because it is based on stereotypes, but at least it is there. The pope was absolutely right to entitle his Apostolic Exhortation, 'On the *dignity* of women'. Working class women, like the rest of us, have the right to be reminded of dignity, rather than inadequacy and alienation. In the film *Educating Rita*, the camera lifts from the popular magazine held in the chapped and roughened hands of a working woman and moves to her desperately plain face. The scene is a hairdressers. 'I want to look like that', she announces firmly to the young assistant who hovers near her. The camera shifts back down to the magazine in her lap. 'That' is an incredibly lovely and glamorous photograph of the Princess of Wales. Each of us seeks a vision of the dignity that comes with our birthright as children of God. Religious communities have traditionally received women from every social background. They have consciously attempted to make community across social divides. While I concede that these attempts have not always been successful, if nothing else because the Church preferred an ordered world which legislated to keep lay, turn and choir sisters in their place, I am nevertheless conscious that the religious life did offer a vision. No-one was barred on social grounds from the dignity it conferred.

Somehow I would like feminism and the religious life to work together to explore a whole variety of models of what it means to be a Christian woman. And I believe that Jill Robson is right, establishing role models and retrieving the positive ones we already have buried in our memories is central to this task.