

INTERFAITH AND WOMEN'S SPIRITUALITY

By PAULINE M. WEBB

WE STOOD IN A CIRCLE HOLDING HANDS. On one side of me was a Hindu woman, a television presenter from North India; on the other a veiled Muslim, a lawyer from the Sudan. In the centre a Native Indian woman from British Columbia was invoking the great Spirit, Spirit of beauty and power and holiness, to come among us. The occasion was the opening of the first ever international, interfaith conference held exclusively for women, meeting in Canada under the auspices of the World Council of Churches five years ago. Since then, there have been similar gatherings in various regions of the world. In the United Kingdom the Interfaith Network has over the past two years organized two conferences specifically for women of different faiths.

Interfaith meetings of women are distinctively different from dialogue meetings where the majority of the participants are men. Women discover that, despite the deep differences of culture and of creed, there is a common basis of female experience which underlies their whole approach to spirituality. They find too that their dialogue develops out of the friendships they form among themselves rather than out of highly structured meetings. Hence, the significance of the circle as our opening formation. There was no acknowledged hierarchy of leadership nor any claims to expertise save that of our own experience of living in a pluralist society and our willingness to learn from one another in a conference where all were encouraged to participate.

It is noteworthy that of all the names of the Deity that might have been invoked on such an occasion, it was primarily upon the Spirit that the women called, that Spirit which in both the Hebrew scriptures and in the New Testament is so often associated with feminine attributes. She broods over the pre-creative chaos and moves over the face of the waters (Gen 1:2); she stirs up the people of God with a force like a mighty wind (in Hebrew *ruach*, a word of feminine gender); she whispers with a still, small voice in the ears of the prophets (1 Kg 19:12); she rustles like a breeze blowing where she will (John 3:8); she inspires wisdom (in Greek *sophia*, also feminine in gender); she groans as in childbirth, sharing our

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longing for the appearance of a new creation (Rom 8:26). She is a disturbing spirit, soaring where she wills, apparently unpredictable.

Awareness of the Spirit's activity is by no means confined to the three great 'faiths of the Book', Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Asian woman theologian, Professor Chung Hyun Kyung, speaking at the World Council of Churches Assembly in Canberra in 1991 on the theme 'Come Holy Spirit', drew on the resources of her own spiritual tradition as a Korean. A Christian herself, she nevertheless acknowledged the manifestation of the Spirit's activity in popular Buddhist spirituality, particularly as it is experienced by women:

For me the image of the Holy Spirit comes from the image of *Kwan In*. She is venerated as the goddess of compassion and wisdom by East Asian women's popular religiosity. She is a *bodhisattva*, enlightened being. She can go into nirvana any time she wants to, but refuses to go into nirvana by herself. Her compassion for all suffering beings makes her stay in this world, enabling other living beings to achieve enlightenment. Her compassionate wisdom heals all forms of life and empowers them to swim to the shores of nirvana. She waits and waits until the whole universe, people, trees, bird, mountains, air, water become enlightened. They can then go into nirvana together where they can live collectively in eternal wisdom and compassion.¹

In a Christian assembly her words provoked great controversy, mainly from western, male theologians who were used to a more academic approach to theology and who wanted to define the limits within which the working of the Spirit can be acknowledged. They spoke gravely of the dangers of syncretism, of imprecision, even of heresy. As in most religious traditions, the spiritual insights of women have tended to be dismissed as dangerous, disturbing and even disruptive. So, in almost all the faiths, attempts have been made to keep women under control, to confine them within the limits of man-made boundaries, to restrict them to the role of preserving the tradition.

Yet women have often been the harbingers of renewal as well as the keepers of tradition. They stand, as it were, at the margins of life, presiding over the ceremonies of both birth and death. No wonder that in primitive tradition they were regarded as the gender most closely in touch with the world of the spirits whilst in many more structured religions they have been regarded as irrational visionaries who threaten the stability of the patriarchal establishment.

Attending an interfaith dialogue conference made up entirely of women can, then, be a heady experience. There is almost a sense of

daring, of risk-taking about it. The question of the role and status of women is often an embarrassing one so far as the major faith communities are concerned. Many interfaith encounters tend to avoid it or treat it as a question of cultural practice rather than of doctrinal requirement. But when women come together specifically to discuss their experience of spirituality, it soon becomes evident that in all the major faith communities the restless eyes of twentieth-century women are probing with new insights the scriptures, the traditions, the rites and the doctrines that have been mainly shaped by men, though nurtured by women throughout the centuries. And they are discovering in the fundamental tenets of their faiths, rather than in the traditional practice of them, a way of reinterpreting the original teaching which could liberate rather than confine their femininity.

At the outset of that first interfaith dialogue meeting in Canada, Diana Eck, the moderator of the World Council of Churches' Unit on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths, spoke of the necessity for women specifically to share their faiths with one another, for in this emerging 'world household' (*oikoumene*), where people of a plurality of faiths are living side by side, women have unique gifts to bring to the household arts of helping people of great diversity to live peaceably together.

Yet in many traditions it is women who have the least opportunity for meeting with others beyond their own community. So often they remain within the compass of their own homes and localities. Encounters with people of other traditions are limited to contact with those whom they meet on a personal basis through the immediate social environment. But it is from the seeds of such personal friendships that the most fruitful dialogue develops. For when women do meet one another, whatever their cultural background, they discover that already their experience as women gives them a common basis for mutual understanding and response.

In introducing themselves, none of the participants at the conference in Canada laid claim to being representative of whole communities, as their male counterparts might well have done. Each woman spoke only in her own right, giving her personal testimony as to how her faith allegiance chimed in or clashed with her self-understanding as a woman. It was out of loyalty to her religious allegiance, rather than disloyalty, that she welcomed the opportunity of exploring with others how religious faith could enrich their lives as women rather than restrict them.

One rule we decided upon at the outset of the dialogue was that we would each speak only out of our own tradition, allowing the people of

other faiths to speak for themselves. We found this to be necessary, as we soon discovered how each of us came with stereotypes of the religious practices of others, particularly in regard to the role of women. For example, I noted the patronizing tones in which some of us western women at first addressed the little, veiled woman from the Sudan until we heard her speak, and discovered her to be a courageous campaigner for human rights as well as an ardent defender of her Muslim faith. Wearing a *hijab*, she explained, was not for her a sign of inferiority but rather a custom which gained her the respect of men and persuaded them to listen to what she had to say rather than simply admire her looks. On her advice, we agreed to use words carefully, making sure that we understood the precise meaning of the terms used in other faiths before we bandied them about. Some, for example, spoke in derogatory terms of 'purdah' as though it inevitably meant submissiveness, whilst others rose to its defence as indicating a protectiveness which underlined women's worth. One of the most frequently misunderstood words proved to be 'fundamentalism'. For the adherents of many faiths, it is a positive rather than a negative word. As one of the Sikh participants put it, she herself was a believer in the fundamentals of her faith; what she objected to was fanaticism.

It is important to acknowledge, in all interfaith dialogue, that language can be a cause of deep misunderstanding. English itself is a western-based, largely male-dominated language. Many women of other traditions find it difficult to talk about their spiritual aspirations in a language that is foreign to them. The language of gesture and ritual, of image and dance is often more eloquent than the use of words.

We found more common understanding when we spoke as women of faith trying to affirm spiritual values in a materialistic society rather than as adherents of just one particular religion. As one woman remarked, most of our observations began with a phrase such as 'I have faith that . . .' rather than a dogmatic assertion, 'I believe'. The greatest concern expressed by most women was not the threat to their faith which came from meeting people of other religions, but rather the problems of trying to live as believers within an almost totally secular environment. Particularly they were concerned about how to be the guardians of faith for their own children and grandchildren. As women, they felt a special responsibility to hand on to another generation a view of life that is 'God-conscious' and that celebrates the sacred amid the secular.

We determined that throughout the dialogue sessions we would try to create 'safe space' where, in the midst of controversy, we allowed ourselves the possibility of sharing and celebrating the sense of a divine

presence that could transcend all our differences. We attended one another's rituals as observers if not as participants, though on many occasions we became absorbed in them too. One of the Native American women expressed it beautifully when she said, 'We sing the songs of women for all women everywhere, and when we pray as women, we believe all women are blessed'. The glorious Shabbat feast which ended the conference rapidly turned into an uproarious celebration of the solidarity of our sisterhood!

I would like to suggest that during our meeting together we explored three positive entry points to our mutual dialogue as women of different faiths.

1. *The language of the womb*

As women, we shared an experience of interior space and of a regular biological rhythm in a life cycle which keeps us aware of our role as life-bearers and sustainers. Yet most of us find in our faith traditions an ambivalent attitude to our sexuality, as though it must inevitably detract from our spirituality. The spirit and the flesh seem to be set in contradiction to one another. Many of the traditional rites and ceremonies of our faith communities suggest that there is some basic flaw in women which renders them unholy and therefore unfit for sacred office.

One of the most searching books to have come out of the continuing interfaith dialogue between women has been one that addresses particularly this issue of the way women's bodily functions are viewed in the various religions of the world. Edited by Jeanne Becher, one of the participants in that first consultation in Canada, it is entitled *Women, religion and sexuality* and is published by the World Council of Churches (Geneva 1991). In the evidence given by women of different religious traditions it becomes clear that, despite the great differences between the various cultures, most religions suggest paradoxically that women are to be both venerated and feared, treated with respect or disgust, honoured for their maternity but idealized for their virginity, valued for their procreative role but blamed for their seductive powers. The various events of their life cycle may be celebrated alongside the parallel events in their brothers' development, but more often they are regarded as something to be kept secret, as though there were something shameful about women's maturity. As sexual beings, they are in many faith communities subject to ritual taboos which call in question their full humanity. But things are changing, and women are rediscovering in the original teachings of their faith that which affirms rather than denies their femininity. The report reaches four conclusions, all of them important for the development of interfaith dialogue:

1. Women need to be more involved in the study and interpretation of their religious scriptures and tradition, especially when they deal with women's role and sexuality.

2. Women need to be more articulate in defining themselves and their faith experience, rather than letting others define them.

3. Women need to discriminate between the central and unchanging givens in religious teaching, and what has been incorporated in each religion through the powerful impact of culture, in particular the seemingly universal patriarchal values relegating women to inferior positions because of their being women.

4. Women may need to scrutinize with greater care the deep psychological, social and maybe economic reasons behind the perpetuation of those negative patriarchal values.²

On the positive side, it can be pointed out that in the language of most faiths, the images of the womb and of child-bearing and of the shedding of blood are all used as powerful symbols of the creative and compassionate activity of God. In the Hebrew scriptures one of the most frequent qualities applied to God is *rachamim*, which means 'tender mercies'. It is derived from the Hebrew word for 'womb', and alludes to the love of a mother for her child. In Hindu tradition, women are associated with the concept of an *auspiciousness* that is life-promoting and within the realm of *dharma*, righteousness. In Mahayana Buddhism there is a concept known as *tathagatarbha* which is based on the belief that all living beings could become a Buddha. The Sanskrit word literally means 'the embryo' or 'the womb'. So what is implied is that those who seek enlightenment are like those whose womb can hold the Buddha's embryo. And in the Christian faith the experience of the disciples awaiting the coming of the Lord is likened to that of pregnant women eagerly expecting both the joy and the pain of childbirth (John 16:21). The symbolic use of such images is one powerful way of affirming female spirituality and could be much more strongly highlighted in all the major faiths.

2. *The language of the earth*

The nursery-bound tradition, at least in western culture, of dressing the little boy in blue, the colour of the sky and the intellect, and the little girl in pink, the colour of flesh and blood, suggests some primeval instinct for associating men with the heavenly values and women with the earthly ones. Certainly the recovery of a feminine element in religion seems to be resulting in a greater awareness of reverence for the earth and for the interdependence of human beings with all created things.

Those who came to the interfaith consultation in Canada from the more ancient, non-systematized religions – the Hindus, the Native Americans, the Canadian Indians and others from primitive, indigenous religious communities – described the great emphasis laid in their traditions on both the male and female attributes of the divine and on the participation of both women and men in the sacred rituals which were closely linked to the seasons of nature and the power of the elements. One of the Hindu participants, who came from the Shrivaisnava tradition, spoke of how the worship of the goddess Shri, popularly known as Lakshmi, presented women particularly with a model of creative liberation. For wherever Vishnu is worshipped, Shri is worshipped too. Vishnu can never be venerated without Shri, though significantly temples have been built for the worship of Shri alone and prayers are often addressed to her individually. Within the 1960s a prayerbook was issued addressing eight different manifestations of Shri, identifying her as the Mother of Creation.

The celebration of the joys of creation were echoed too in the Sikh prayers in which we were invited to share.

Day and night are both female nurses
With whom the whole creation plays.

Two American participants from the recently developing Wiccan movements, which they described as 'neo-pagan', spoke of how they were trying to recreate a movement that became fragmented long ago, particularly at the time when women suspected of having supernatural powers or extraordinary spiritual gifts were burned as witches. They described how the rebirth of their movement had come about through their search for a genuinely feminine and ecologically sound spirituality. They were intent on recovering lost rituals which expressed a reverence for the earth as life-giving mother. And in a world where the ecology is under such serious threat, all of the faiths are looking again to the resources they have within them for this spiritual acknowledgement of the 'earthiness' of God, of which women, traditionally the planters rather than the hunters, have always been aware.

Writing in the *International Review of Mission* in April 1992, Marta Benavides, a Baptist pastor from El Salvador, wrote:

My mother almost never went to church, but always led us to meditate about our life, the creation, and our role in the community. At church I was being taught all the 'do nots' such as sectarianism, to see sexuality as evil, woman as subservient, the individuality and blindness

of the protestant work ethic and the supremacy of 'man' over a creation that had to be subdued and dominated, all of which deny life, family and nation, and destroy nature and the planet. From my mother I learned both at home and in the community, spirituality, commitment and strength, and that the demand and requirement of God is for justice for all God's children.³

3. *The language of listening*

One of the most remarkable features of the women's interfaith conference held in Canada was that the only man present kept silent throughout the whole of the proceedings! He was the Reverend Wesley Ariarajah, the Director of the World Council of Churches' Dialogue Unit. When in the last session we finally persuaded him to say something, he suggested that there are three questions that need to be asked of any encounter for dialogue. Does it create community? Has it become a meeting that everyone has owned? Has it changed people? To each of these questions we felt able to give an affirmative answer. A large part of that was due to the fact that we were all women, freed from the constraints that women still so often feel in the presence of men. There was a sense of openness between us which enabled women who were more accustomed to being unheard to speak with confidence of what their own experience had been. Through such shared experience, bonds of friendship were woven which were able to stand the strains even of misunderstanding and of controversy. The women seemed to become more concerned about their relationship with one another than about the various religious systems they were called upon to defend.

There was no shrinking from difficult issues, nor from discussing the differences between our faiths, but, as one of the participants put it, 'We do not have to share the same heroes, nor inhabit the same symbolic universe, but how do we learn to share the real, present universe, which we all inhabit together?'

In her recent book, *The wisdom of fools* (SPCK 1993), Mary Grey writes of what has been called a 'listening logic', which is, as she puts it, 'an activity which requires the whole person. It requires the vulnerability to the other which is presupposed in the idea of the connected self.' Such ability to listen and to act as a kind of midwife to other people's thoughts and aspirations has been said to characterize women's dialogue with one another:

This is exactly what feminist thinkers have been stressing, in placing a high importance on 'hearing into speech', and the primacy of meta-

phors of hearing over seeing. Whereas listening has been accepted as a tool of liberation theology, as a means of giving marginalized groups access to discourse, Plato shows us that listening, intuiting another logic, is actually the very heart of the whole process of reasoning. Where a listening culture is absent, what other alternative is there but to fall into the adversarial logic of Yes or No? When such a logic is controlled by those who hold the reins of power, small wonder that the logic of domination seems inevitable and decreed by 'the nature of things'.

In the context of the truths of faith, and revealed doctrine, a listening logic highlights the very fragility of these doctrines . . . Being vulnerable to each other allows 'other ways of knowing' their full space.⁴

Women who are prepared to learn the language of listening and to follow the logic of the heart as well as of the head find that in dialogue with other women they can affirm both their femininity and their faith. Through solidarity with their sisters of other faiths their own spirituality is enriched.

NOTES

¹ Official Assembly Report, *Signs of the Spirit* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), p 46.

² Jeanne Becher (ed), *Women, religion and sexuality* (Geneva: WCC, 1991), p xi.

³ Marta Benavides, *International Review of Mission* vol LXXXI, No 322 (WCC 1992), p 215.

⁴ Mary Grey, *The wisdom of fools* (London: SPCK, 1993), p 91.