

GENDER AND ETHICS IN SPIRITUALITY

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FEMINISM HAS INFUSED ALL FIELDS of the discipline of theology with a renewed vision of Christian living, one which is attentive to the ways in which gender shapes our experience and apprehension of the Gospel. Rooted in the determination to write women's experience into theology not as an addendum but as a crucial strand which goes to make up the complexity which is human experience, feminism has been one of a number of developments which has effected a paradigm shift in theological praxis and reflection. One dimension of the emerging critique is the recognition that the internal boundaries of Christian thought need to be revised. The experience and praxis basis of feminist theology has resulted in a critique of the traditional, neat division of thought from action, doctrine and spirituality from ethics. Indeed it is central to the feminist theological vision that our spiritual, intellectual and moral lives are intimately connected, are shaped one by the other and are but aspects of an evolving self, a self which is embodied, relational and oriented towards the transcendent.

Feminist theologians and philosophers have made significant interventions in debates on specific moral issues. It is impossible, for example, to examine current thinking on the ethics of war and violence without paying attention to the work of Mary Condren or Sara Rudick, or the range of questions surrounding the ethics of reproduction without taking seriously that of Lisa Sowle Cahill or Beverly Wildung Harrison. Although such interventions are important, the feminist contribution to ethics is far more significant than the issues which feminists address. This is the case because in addition to the attempts to take women's interests seriously in relation to particular problem areas, feminist ethicists have also turned their attention to the underlying categories, concepts and methodologies. In this paper, then, I will focus on some of the shifts in conceptualizing the ethical enterprise which arise from a renewed spiritual vision of human well-being. Obviously no homogeneity can be presumed, since the theological and philosophical commitments of feminists are as varied as in any other field. Nonetheless it is possible to identify some central concerns and

proposals which can be broadly identified as feminist and which arise from the determination to take the category of gender seriously in ethics – and, therefore inevitably, in spirituality.

The pattern of the feminist interaction with ethical theory (or moral theology, if one is thinking specifically of Catholic theology) has replicated that of feminist engagements with other disciplines. Essentially the early phases were concerned with criticizing the particular disciplines for being ‘gender blind’ and with enumerating the many instances where the issue of gender was ignored to the detriment of a more accurate and perceptive understanding. Thankfully the discipline has moved on from this (undeniably necessary) phase of conscientization and has begun its constructive phase, taking the first tentative steps towards articulating an ethical theory and praxis which is attentive to gender and other differences and which aspires to an inclusive ethic. This is where I would situate this paper. While recognizing the debts which feminist ethics owes to traditional articulations of values and principles, the focus will be on those elements which make the feminist contribution to theological ethics distinctive. In describing and commenting on how feminist theological ethics distinguishes itself from more classical formulations I intend to draw attention to some key features of feminist theological ethics. However, such reconceptualizations are not without their own difficulties. The inconsistencies and limitations of feminist contributions to theological ethics will also be of concern to us here. Essentially the feminist critique of and contribution to theological ethics is in its infancy, although significant developments have occurred. I approach the feminist contribution to theological ethics as an emerging discipline, in dialogue with the tradition and attempting to redefine the entire ethical project in a manner which takes seriously the variable of gender.

Experience and praxis

Carol Gilligan’s *In a different voice* has emerged as a classic in feminist ethics. One of the central arguments of the book is that women and men appear to display different approaches to morality, both in relation to their understanding of the ethical enterprise and in terms of the resolution of ethical dilemmas. Gilligan came to this conclusion by comparing women’s actual responses to questions about their own ethical beliefs and commitments with the textbook accounts of Kohlberg and his school. We will consider the proposal that women and men conceptualize the ethical enterprise differently a little later. One of the features of Gilligan’s approach which is most significant is

that, in line with most feminists, she has attributed a primary role to women's experience and praxis in their articulations of alternative approaches to ethics. Thus one of the key features of feminist ethical theory is that it claims as a legitimate starting-point for action and reflection the concrete experiences and praxis of women and feminist men. In affirming this starting-point feminist ethical theory intends to accomplish a methodological shift, since it claims as its primary resources not sacred texts and traditions (although these are accorded an important role), but contemporary experience and praxis. This approach to feminist ethics draws heavily on the work of the biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. Fiorenza insists that feminism introduces a new magisterium into theology. Her term for this new magisterium is the *ekklesia gynaiikon*, woman-church, which is the community of women and men dedicated to eradicating all forms of institutionalized inequality. The core of the feminist critique of religion for Fiorenza, then, is that it relocates the power of interpretation, moving it from traditional centres of power. Although there are many difficulties associated with such a stance, it remains a central methodological commitment.

Although Gilligan herself seems to be unaware of the problems associated with according primacy to women's experience and praxis in the ethical arena, subsequent discussions of feminist approaches to ethics have begun to address this problem. By writing women's experience and praxis into the centre of ethical thinking and action one is not advocating the abandonment of ethics to the unmediated subjectivities of women's lives. Women's experience is a central resource, certainly. However, since it is basically fractured it requires reinterpretation, evaluation and critique. Feminists have begun to acknowledge the reality that women's experience is extremely varied. In addition they have also recognized that competing subjectivities require arbitration, since women do not share a uniform, or necessarily mutually compatible, material reality. However, although experience and praxis do not constitute ethical reflection, they do inform it and operate as a norm of evaluation. They are central resources, but not in an atheoretical or unmediated sense. Feminist theological ethics places the contemporary experiences of women and feminist men at the heart of the attempt to reformulate the ethical enterprise, and is constantly reformed in dialogue with these categories.

Reflection on women's experience and praxis has raised a range of concerns in relation to traditional categories and norms in moral theology. They range from dissatisfaction with the practical conclusions drawn from particular values to the recognition of the limitations

of other principles and norms. A theme which runs through discussions of this emerging ethic is that the feminist approach is one which values wholeness, one which resists traditional dualisms and which strives towards an account of human well-being that is rooted in the interplay of body, mind and spirit. Developments in spirituality too have emphasized such an approach. The successful integration of the many aspects of our personhood is both a starting-point for and aspiration of the emerging feminist ethic. However, as with any evolving discipline, there are inconsistencies which need to be addressed and untidy loose ends. I wish to focus on just three aspects of feminist theological thinking in this regard. The notion of moral autonomy emerges as an important feature of the feminist ethical enterprise. However, its relationship with the newly emerging concept of relationality or care needs to be addressed. So too does the issue of the differences between women and the implications this has for the assumption of Gilligan that there is a discernible difference in the ways in which women and men envisage and resolve their moral dilemmas. Arising from this is the pressing question of whether feminist theological ethics can be thought of as a regional or local ethic or whether it has universalist aspirations. This necessary attention to detail must be pursued in the context of the non-negotiable element of the feminist ethical project which is both a vision and a praxis of spiritual and moral wholeness. One should think of this paper, then, as notes towards articulating a coherent feminist theological ethic, rather than a final version of the same.

Autonomy and relationality

Autonomy has been a key word in both the women's movement and feminist theory generally. The classic critique has been that one of the primary features of women's lives under patriarchy has been their refusal to take responsibility for their situation. Valerie Saiving's influential essay, 'The human situation: a feminine view', was one of the first to argue that Christian theology and ethics have, in part, contributed to and promoted this lack of autonomy in women. They have done so, she suggests, through developing a very androcentric account of sin. Mainstream theology, she proposes, understands sin in terms of pride, arrogance, will-to-power, 'the unjustified concern of the self for its own power and prestige . . . reducing those others to the status of mere objects . . .'.¹ This account of human failing is an expression of a very particular kind of behaviour, and is very far from the experiences and likely failings of the kind of behaviour expected of women.

Saiving suggests if one examines the actual situations of women another story emerges. Socialization and education encourage women to behave in a childlike and immature fashion. Traditionally women were rarely if ever required to act autonomously or to take responsibility for their life situation. Protection and economic support from husbands ensured that pride, arrogance, will-to-power were failings that women were unlikely to betray. Women, Saiving argues, are more likely, because of traditional expectations, to fail in an entirely different way. It is the failure to take responsibility for actions and choices made, the tendency to allow oneself to play the role of victim, and the acceptance of social roles without recognizing one's ability and responsibility to resist them. The temptations of women, not because of women's innate nature, but because of the social construction of gender,

have a quality which can never be encompassed by such terms as pride and will-to-power. They are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility and diffuseness; lack of an organising centre or focus; dependence on others for one's own self-understanding, in short underdevelopment or negation of the self.²

There is a certain extent to which such an assessment of women's situation is now inaccurate. Nonetheless it has been centrally the agenda of the women's movement to insist that ambition, self-sufficiency and independence are qualities which women need to nurture rather than to resist. Theology, however, continues to speak of such impulses in terms of failure or sin. In ethics this has resulted in a reluctance to trust women as competent moral agents. In spirituality it has extolled the virtues of self-sacrifice and passivity. The autonomy towards which adults strive in the moral arena is only ambivalently expected of women. Rather than being required and encouraged to make responsible decisions about every aspect of our lives, women are often relieved of this task by hiding behind unquestioned assumptions about women's nature or women's traditional roles. Thus one of the central concerns of feminist ethics has been to insist that the principle of autonomy be acknowledged in all areas of moral decision-making. Because social expectations of how women ought to behave have been more akin to what is expected of children than of adults, the move towards responsible decision-making has not been encouraged. Feminist ethicists have thus insisted that autonomy in the moral sphere is essential if women, individually and collectively, are to be respected as responsible members of society.

Such an insistence on moral autonomy for both women and men brings with it the language and theories of rights. Both politically and theoretically women have appealed for the extension of all human rights to each women. This has been an important element of feminist politics and theory. The promotion of self-sufficient, autonomous and independent women has been a central concern of feminism. However, the understanding of autonomy has not been that of classic liberal philosophy. Rather it has been modified by that view most commonly associated with feminist ethics, the ethic of care of Gilligan. Through her work with young women Gilligan claimed to have uncovered what she considered to be different modes of moral judgement, named justice and care, which are gender-related but not gender-specific. She suggested that women tend to subscribe to an ethic of care which departs radically from theories structured around concepts of justice.

According to Gilligan those who operate out of an ethic of care differ from those who operate with an ethic of justice in some important respects. Individuals (mostly women) define themselves as connected rather than focusing on their separateness, understand relationships as response to the other on his or her own terms and resolve moral problems with attention to maintaining the connections between interdependent individuals. A central concern, therefore, is not strict equality or fairness, but whether relationships are maintained or restored. The autonomy which is advocated draws on an account of the human person which understands the experience of human freedom within a transcendental and relational context. It arises from a spirituality which sees the self as one who is defined in relation to the other and God, not as the self-sufficient ego of western philosophy.

This ethic of care or response is a distinctive approach to decision-making, according to Gilligan, and not a retarded development of the more usual ethic of justice in which fairness and strict equality is prized above all. What emerges from an ethical theory which arises from and is accountable to women's experience is not one, but two distinct approaches to morality. On the one hand many feminists are appealing to an ethic of justice as the location from which women may rightfully claim equality and the extension of rights; on the other hand there is a clear sense that the traditional experiences and roles of women as carers need to be revalued and reappropriated. Christian ethics has in fact tended to advocate an ethic of justice, while recognizing some of the values which Gilligan has designated as an ethic of care. However, I believe that Gilligan's proposal is misguided in its attempt to construct this dual, gender-specific account of morality. While Gilligan's

work does indeed bring to light the deficiencies in an ethic of justice which is based on thinking of persons as independent and unconnected, it is my view that its value lies in appropriating such concerns to an ethic which recognizes the significance of justice, impartiality and consistency, rather than in arguing for a distinctive ethic of care.

One of the main problems with Gilligan's work is that it is not at all clear whether she is advocating a type of biological essentialism, another version of the Freudian 'biology is destiny' thesis. There is actually a conflict in Gilligan's own work: on occasion she seems to support the position that caring 'is the constructive activity through which women achieve their femininity and against which masculinity takes shape',³ that is, there is an implied connection between an ethic of care and femaleness, an ethic of care as an intrinsically female characteristic. At other times she suggests that this alternative voice may be a function of women's social, cultural and economic positions. Indeed Joan Tronto, in a criticism of Gilligan's work, suggests that 'if moral difference is a function of social position rather than gender then the morality Gilligan has identified with women might be better identified with subordinate or minority status'.⁴ In short, one's gender may not be the defining feature of access to this ethic of care, rather it may simply be a result of one's position *vis-à-vis* the dominant culture. Thus Gilligan may be raising the spectre of essentialism needlessly.

For my own part I tend to resist the notion of biological essentialism very strongly, whether of the patriarchal or feminist variety. However, much recent work on the concept of embodiment seems to promise the possibility of taking seriously the reality that we inhabit bodies and are, at least in part, shaped and constructed by the gendered body, without being bound or determined by it. Luce Irigaray's *An ethics of sexual difference*⁵ is extremely interesting on this point. She recognizes that the culture of the west is monosexual, that there is no universal in this culture, that what is taken to be neutral – the discourse of science or philosophy – is in fact gendered: it is the discourse of the male subject.⁶ Thus for Irigaray there can be no short cut to articulating either a 'female way of knowing' (which is essentially what Gilligan attempts), nor a state beyond sexual difference. To do so without re-articulating our present organization of male and female would only maintain the deceptive universality of the male. She is striving towards an ethic of sexual difference which, she says, could be our salvation if we thought it through. She insists therefore that 'in order for an ethic of sexual difference to come into being, we must constitute a possible plan for each sex, body and flesh to inhabit'.⁷ The manner, then, in which we

employ the variable of gender may need to be far more sophisticated than Gilligan's proposal might lead one to think.

Difference and particularity

The focus on experience as a central resource for feminist ethics has resulted, albeit belatedly, in the realization of the plural, fragmented nature of human experience. Both feminist theology and liberation theology have insisted on writing the experiences of those on the margins into any description of human experience. Their criticism of classical theology's assumption of the exhaustion of the substance of human experience in the western male version is well known. The irony is, however, that these theologies, both of which have intended to provide a more inclusive description of the category, have been criticized for failing to do precisely this. Liberation theology has come under attack for failing to take account of female experience, feminist theology for its neglect of the variable of race and class in its analysis.

Women of colour especially have alerted feminists to their racist assumptions and practices. The works of Barbara Christian, bell hooks and Alice Walker, among others, have taught white feminists that we have repeated the central crime of patriarchy in failing to acknowledge the particularity of our own experience. White women's experience and praxis has acquired the status of normativity, while women of colour have been further marginalized. Such a whitewashing of experience has not gone unchallenged, however. Womanist theologians and theorists have insisted that the feminist movement acknowledge this.

As women begin to formulate theologies, the notion of difference has become centrally located. A theology which is based on women's experience and praxis, which is sensitive to racial, class and other differences among women, must recognize the variety of commitments, priorities and values among women. If indeed feminist ethics begins to recognize that women have what Emily Culpepper calls different primary emergencies, we will be more modest in our claims or our theology. As experiences change and are interpreted in different ways, so too does the theology. Womanist, *mujerista* and other newly emerging theologies have required mainstream feminist ethics to rethink the assumptions it has made about the nature of women's experience and the theology to which it has given rise. Feminists cannot begin with the assumption of sameness. Indeed if there is to be a commonality to be described it should rightfully originate from those on the margins. Any minimizing of difference should legitimately come from women who have heretofore been excluded from describing

the category of women's experience. Employing such a hermeneutic, however, raises major methodological and philosophical questions for feminist ethics.

There has long been a respect for pluralism in the Christian spiritual life. The traditional reluctance to sanctify one particular spirituality has resulted in a field which prizes difference and multiplicity. The way in which this experience has been honoured and celebrated is an inspiration for feminist ethicists who see the need for a comparable facilitation of difference in the moral realm. Spirituality has long been recognized as a vital source for envisioning ethical values, norms and principles. The freedom it has enjoyed has resulted in a rich tradition of reflection on virtue and character. However, this diversity of language, concepts and vision has rarely been extended to discussions of norms and principles. Yet an ethical vision arising out of a spirituality which honours all dimensions of human embodied and relational experience must, of necessity, respect a pluralism of values. Feminist ethicists have thus been reluctant to allow the boundaries between spiritual and moral reflection and praxis to be drawn.

With the recognition of the importance of difference comes a critique of the disengaged Cartesian subject. This is so because such an account of the subject failed to take seriously the differences which social location produces on one's analysis and perception of a given situation. However, feminist ethicists are among a growing number of theologians and philosophers who have consistently criticized the view that the subject can obtain a rational and objective view of the world 'only to the extent that it is disengaged from natural and social worlds and even from its own body'.⁸ The notion of the subject as 'rational and free but languageless, cultureless, historyless'⁹ is gone. In its place is a subject which is historical, embodied and relational, one who encounters the world not as a disengaged observer, but as a participant in and co-creator of that world. Such a construal of the human subject is a product of recognizing the historicity of human experience and the ideology-bound nature of all knowledge.

The meaning and purpose of tradition is also seriously challenged since the predominant understanding of tradition has assumed a homogeneity in relation to human beings which, we have come to realize, does not exist. An account of tradition which is static, on a level which transcends human society, deals with all cultures, persons and communities as though their ethical concerns, interests and confusions were identical. This clearly is undercut by the recognition of the role of personal interests, perspectives and prejudices in the apprehension of

meaning in any social context. Thus one has an emerging ethic which accepts that human experience (including women's experience) is diverse and that one's location is relevant in terms of one's perspectives, values and judgements.

What kind of knowledge is possible?

Such an account of the foundations of feminist ethics, however, brings some serious epistemological questions. If one subscribes to such a view then one's understanding of knowledge is in need of scrutiny. Knowledge is considered to bear the interests and biases of the knower so that no value-free, objective knowledge is possible. As is argued by Gadamer,

It is not so much our judgments as it is our prejudices that constitute our being. . . . Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified and erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact the historicity of our existence entails that prejudice, in the initial sense of the word, constitutes the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply the condition whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us.¹⁰

With such a recognition of the role of interest in knowledge, statements which claim a universal or objective purchase in ethics are under suspicion.

If there is no value-free knowledge, including moral knowledge, are not all responses to ethical questions equally valuable and valid? Are not all ethical systems simply to be judged by internal criteria of consistency and coherence, without any reference to claims of objective moral truths? Appreciation of the historical, ideological, embodied nature of all knowing appears to leave us impotent in the ethical realm, where each answer, value or norm is a matter of personal preference. Or, to put it in more specific terms, if I acknowledge the importance and value of difference, if I respect the view that western women have defined the concept of women's experience with very little or no reference to anything beyond their own immediate, culturally dependent views, then I must accept that it is extremely difficult to make ethical judgements across cultures. For all I can know is that, from my perspective, some particular practice appears to be unjust. The importation of gender perspectives into the ethical realm has resulted in a critical stance in relation to the foundations of ethics. This is of course not due entirely to feminist criticisms of Christian ethics; nonetheless

because of the great significance which feminists have attached to the category of women's experience, the issue arises in a particularly acute fashion.

In my view the most significant issue for ethics raised by the importation of gender perspectives is that of whether any aspiration to either a universally agreed set of ethical principles or any sense of ethical objectivity is possible. At many points feminist ethicists appear to imply that there is no ethical objectivity, just difference and ethical pluralism which must be respected. The logic of such a position is described well by Seyla Benhabib when she suggests that if one subscribes unambiguously to this view, then transcendental guarantees of truth are dead; in the agonal struggle of language games there is no commensurability; there are no criteria of truth transcending local disclosures, only the endless struggle of local narratives vying with one another for legitimation.¹¹ Yet while it is important for feminists to recognize the contextuality of knowledge, it is equally important, in my view, that feminists be able to arbitrate between different values, principles and commitments. To do otherwise would be to reduce the claims of feminist theory and praxis to personal whim. The experience of living in a sexist, racist world quite legitimately, in my view, will not allow one to resolve ethical issues in this manner.

One of the most significant challenges for feminist and indeed other contemporary ethical theories is to formulate a response to this paradoxical position. I suggest the only adequate response will be the reformulation of secure foundations from which to construct an ethic which is realist, one which, although not dismissive of ethical and cultural pluralism, aspires to some universal purchase. Yet the elevation of difference to the supreme philosophical and cultural value has left feminist ethics in an impossible position regarding social protest cross-culturally. The recognition of differences of perspective, value and commitment among women and men has been an important development in theological thinking. I do not in any way intend to minimize this value. However, this recognition must be coupled with an enquiry about how best to articulate our commonalities and work towards building a shared ethic. To do otherwise would mean endorsing whatever practices and norms of behaviour emerge from each society or culture, simply by virtue of their presence. This is quite clearly at odds with any conceivable definition of feminist ethics or spirituality.

Conclusion

When one begins to ask questions about the importance of gender perspectives in ethics one is entering a minefield. There are issues

about the social construction of gender, the viability of the idea of complementarity and of embodiment. One also finds oneself up against particularly difficult ethical problems which are especially relevant to women's lives, in the fields of reproduction, family, work and health. These areas are being worked at more and more by women and men who are sensitive to the potential differences which gender makes in the consideration of these and other concerns. But in addition feminist ethicists have had to face difficult foundational questions and have to consider the logical outcome of many ideas and slogans often adopted in haste. These discussions have far-reaching effects, not only in terms of feminist ethics but in relation to the crisis in ethics generally. By virtue of the urgency with which feminists have had to examine these issues, and because of the particularly acute manner in which they have arisen for feminists, the contribution of feminist ethics to discussions about the future shape of theological ethics is likely to be considerable. The function of Christian ethics is to enable us to discern how to recognize and do the good in each situation. Feminist theological ethics too expresses its objectives in similar language. One of the most important elements of the feminist revision of ethics is the recognition that this cannot be a purely intellectual endeavour. Rather it must arise out of, and be accountable to, a vision of human persons as relational, embodied and oriented towards the inclusive God of the Christian tradition.

NOTES

¹ V. Saiving, 'The human situation: a feminine view', C. Christ and J. Plaskow (eds), *Woman-spirit rising: a feminist reader in religion* (Harper and Row, 1979), p 26.

² *Ibid.*, p 37.

³ J. Tronto, 'Beyond gender difference' in Larrabee, *An ethic of care: feminist and interdisciplinary perspectives* (Routledge, 1993), p 242.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 243.

⁵ L. Irigaray, *An ethic of sexual difference* (Athlone Press, 1993).

⁶ M. Whitford, *Philosophy in the feminine* (Routledge, 1991), p 16.

⁷ L. Irigaray, *op. cit.*, p 17.

⁸ J. Martin Soskice, 'The God of hope', *Doctrine and Life* vol 44 (April 1994), p 203.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 204.

¹⁰ H. Gadamer, 'The universality of the hermeneutical problem' in D. E. Linge, *Philosophical hermeneutics* (University of California Press, 1976), p 9.

¹¹ S. Benhabib, *Feminist contentions* (Routledge, 1995), p 288.