

## SEMINAR ON WOMEN'S THEOLOGY

This new seminar engaged the topic of the "Construction of Feminist Systematic Theology" with the helpful papers of Susan Ross, "Notes Toward a Feminist Sacramental Theology," and Elizabeth Johnson, "God as Triune: Mystery of Relation." We used the papers as springboards into a conversation about feminist/womanist theological methodology for the constructive task. The conversation focused first on Johnson's paper and then on that of Ross.

Early questions revolved around the model Johnson employs in her project. She indicated that her work involves two fundamental moves. First is the decision to explore the trinity, rather than simply the problem of God, especially because of its value as a critique of patriarchy. Her second goal is to test the capacity of female symbols to bear the expression of the three persons of God. She is using a liberation model, both as distinct from any simple "translation" of the male metaphors of Father, Son and Spirit that would simply substitute female names, and distinct from a liberal model concerned only with symbolizing the equality of the sexes. The choice for a liberation model is clearly linked to naming the patriarchal god as detrimental to women, to nature, to cultures (e.g., South Africa), and to seeking criteria for recognizing truth, justice, and love in particular practical situations. This concern for praxis was also a choice Ross shared, as well as many in the room.

The problem of the model led directly to the issue of the use and meaning of analogy. Johnson firmly defended a Thomistic understanding of analogy that insists that while our language may be used to point to God, it never has literal value in relation to God. We can indicate; we cannot know. All human language, including that used in scripture, stands under this rule. Thus no literal credit may be given even to the traditional use of Father-Son language for God. She insisted on this point particularly because of the presence of that language as revealed in scripture. In keeping with Thomas, it is fair to say that the scriptural language is not merely a product of unaided reason, since grace is always already involved. However the presence of grace does not in any way eliminate the human reality of our metaphors under any circumstances. Furthermore, other metaphors, including female ones, may be proposed and tested for their own relative adequacy to the major insights of the tradition and our praxis of truth, justice and love. It is precisely the apophatic moment of analogy that allows, even requires, this experiment.

Several suggestions were made regarding the trinity itself as a theological opportunity to transform patriarchal myths. One, that the dynamism of the relations of the persons explored by the Greek fathers be investigated as a resource. Two, that men may avoid examining the category of relation because of a fear of dependence in situations of mutuality. Giles Milhaven raised this, and noted that we

do depend upon who/what we truly love. Three, that the metaphor of human beings as two sexes made in God's image may provide clues about the way we understand the trinity as love. This might rework the Greek notion of circumincession (*perichōrēsis*).

The conversation regarding Ross's paper was equally rich, and included issues raised above. Our attention turned particularly to symbol, around which several points circulated. Our present sacramental symbols, e.g., in baptism, both mask the presence of women's activity, here, gestating, birthing and mothering, and yet express these even while they are not verbalized. However, present symbols and their attendant systematic constructs do not adequately express the experience of many women. We also need new symbols to carry this experience.

A variety of concerns also came to the fore about the body. For Ross the body is a key category for sacramental theology. It must be considered by feminists in terms of its central mediation of all human experience. However, it is fundamentally ambiguous as both the source of pleasure and pain, the *sine qua non* of our existence yet limited and subject to death. Male bodily experience has dominated our tradition, including, ironically, its denial of the body, and its association of body with women as inferior beings. If we are to appropriate the body as a category for theological reflection and for symbolization, Ross argued that we need to be aware of its history, and to search for an alternative model to the better/worse hierarchy in which spirit/body, male/female have been placed. We would undertake this fully aware of the inescapable ambiguity of the body itself. With this project underway, we can also ask the truly interesting questions like what do bodily knowing and bodily loving really mean? At the core of the project, Ross's work is intended to open up paths for the revision of present liturgical practice.

As the conversation drew to a close we spoke again of the critical role of women's experience as the basis for our constructive tasks. We also raised the necessarily concomitant issue for Christian theologians of the identity and meaning of the tradition that has shaped us, and to which we are contributing. How do we use that as source(s)? Finally, the issues of particularity and praxis criteria of truth were before us.

This led the group, in our subsequent business meeting, to propose that we continue in Atlanta with a dialogue with black women theologians, so that we might pursue the issues clustered around our constructive work attentive to the realities of particularity, difference, oppression and systemic location.

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