

WOMEN'S SEMINAR IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Practical Action and Postmodern Theory
Coconveners: Susan M. St. Ville, St. Lawrence University
Susan M. Simonaitis, Fordham University
Reports by: Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Drew University
Jeanette Rodriguez, Seattle University
Mary Hines, Emmanuel College
Presenters: Susan M. Simonaitis, Fordham University
Mary Gerhart, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

This year's seminar was designed to bring together two important dimensions of recent constructive work in feminist, mejeurista, and womanist theologies. Because the creation and maintenance of international connections between scholars and activists have emerged within a variety of contexts, the first part of the seminar was dedicated to reports on three events of national and international scope that took place in the past year. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz recounted and reflected upon her experience of attending the Beijing Conference. Jeanette Rodriguez evaluated her experience of the recent meeting between Latin American theologians in EATWOT and North American Hispanic theologians. Mary Hines analyzed the recent Women's Ordination Conference and the efforts of the Network of Women Theologians.

Such national and international connections have initiated conversations within all areas of theological reflection. The second part of the seminar explored one emerging area of theological debate in feminist and womanist theologies. Following the reports, Susan Simonaitis and Mary Gerhart presented papers that explored the relationship between experience and theory in the constructive theological efforts of scholars who make partial or full use of postmodern theories.

Reflecting on two articles by Sheila Greeve Davaney ("Problems with Feminist Theory: Historicity and the Search for Sure Foundations" and "The Limits of the Appeal to Women's Experience"), Simonaitis mapped out a number of postmodern trajectories and the conflicts these trajectories have initiated within feminist and womanist theological discussions. She argued that feminist theologians who avoid making foundational claims and feminist theologians who are unwilling to avoid doing so are divided by significant theological differences. At the same time, they are united by the effort to speak publicly about the

relationship between God-talk and liberation from oppression. Simonaitis suggested that there is a pressing need for feminist, womanist, mejeurista, and lesbian theologians to examine the character of genuinely "public" theology in a global context in order to sort through issues that postmodern theories raise within our diverse theological efforts.

Mary Gerhart examined the debate within theology about postmodern philosophical claims from the viewpoint of genre theory. Gerhart noted that womanist theologians and scholars have initiated the move from concern with universal claims towards the analysis of concrete historical achievements in feminist theology, and she suggested that the postmodern exploration of language as a site of oppression can be instructive within the debate over what constitutes concrete historical achievement. She also suggested that feminist theologians might benefit from a deepened awareness of the process of moving from experience to theory, and then to experience once again. With continual reminders of the procedural movement of our efforts, Gerhart argued, we might enjoy the confidence and boldness that other disciplines, such as science, experience in relation to claims that, in the end, are often temporary. Finally, Gerhart reminded us that the global context of theological reflection requires both critique and restoration. Whereas postmodern theories offer potent critiques of the losses and gains of modernism, theologians must find ways to undertake responsibly the process of restoration.

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