

PANEL: THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THEOLOGY

This special session consisted of four brief presentations by members of a panel and then small-group discussions among the audience. The papers that follow are revised versions of the panelists' presentations. After them the Coordinator presents a summary of the audience's discussions.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH, REFLECTION AND COMMUNICATION: A RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Given the increasing, intense and at times acrimonious attention to so-called "women's issues" in nearly every dimension of human life, it may not initially appear that the CTSA is hosting an earthshaking event in sponsoring this panel to open its thirty-eighth annual convention. Works on feminist theology, while hardly on every theologian's required reading list, have nonetheless provoked such substantial questioning and proffered so many creative views that it seems almost safe to assume that theology will never again be the same. So it seems altogether appropriate—even natural—that the topic of women's role in theological research, reflection and communication should become the subject of our corporate study.

Yet, lest we take this topic too casually, I think we need to acknowledge from the outset that it would have been unthinkable in any other era in the church. This historical perspective is indeed a sobering one: women have been invisible in the theological realm. Ralph Ellison's magnificent parable of the black experience, *Invisible Man*, is in a very real sense our story, as he implicitly recognizes: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"¹

In one way or another virtually every feminist theologian has addressed women's invisibility in the traditions of our religious community; my task here is not to account either for their methodology or conclusions, but, drawing upon their vision, to speculate about what theology might look like if women were part of the picture. Though I was asked to focus on women as communicators of theology, I wish to re-focus slightly by taking up instead issues in regard to theology and education as they appear from a feminist perspective. I do so for two reasons: (1) I associate communications primarily with technical matters in regard to media and group dynamics; thus, important as this field is, it seems more restricted than education and hence of less intrinsic importance to the theological enterprise; and (2) my academic work is in religious education, a field inextricably related to theology, though not subsumed by it. Specifically, I intend to discuss aspects of a feminist critique of theological education in light of some recent work in educational philosophy and theory, ultimately taking up the question of what a broadened sense of education might mean for the nature of theology.

¹ (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 568.

Several factors shape my perspective on the topic. First, though women have largely been excluded from the theological realm until recently, religious education (regarded primarily as the catechetical instruction of children) has traditionally been relegated to women. Ann Douglas's thesis that religion became domesticated in nineteenth century North America and hence feminized (religiosity for women and rationality for men) helps to point out the correlation between the feminization of religious education—at least in regard to its practice, since men have dominated as its historians and theorists—and its status as the “poor cousin” of theology.² Ironically, many women now entering theology resist identification with religious education because they sense that it is an almost exclusively women's work.³ Furthermore, I am not a specialist in the ever-burgeoning field of feminist theology, and despair at the possibility of doing justice to the literature; what I hope is simply to reflect the kinds of musings it increasingly engenders in my own thinking about theology and education.

My identification of standpoint follows from one of the most basic assertions of feminist thought: the recognition that all knowledge is perspectival, shaped by social and cultural factors. When Berger and Luckmann wrote that “everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted *by men* and subjectively meaningful *to them* as a coherent world,” they (albeit unintentionally) expressed what women are coming increasingly to realize: the constructs we have for mapping and interpreting our common sense world in both the public and private domain are male ways of construing reality, and not the way things necessarily are.⁴ The consequences of this recognition are both profound and extensive; moreover, they exact an emotional cost: to question what has been so deeply internalized, so long taken-for-granted, is to find oneself suddenly a stranger in what had once been familiar and beloved company. To discover the deformations wrought by androcentrism in the texts of our tradition:⁵ to acknowledge that, though Vatican II may have been a “world council,” it was like every other council in being constituted by only one gender;⁶ to find liturgical celebration so exclusively dominated by male officials and imag-

² *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1977). Cf. S. B. Thistlethwaite, “The Feminization of American Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 76 (1981), 391-402.

³ See D. W. Danner and C. Croteau-Chonka, “A Data-Based Picture: Women in Parish Religious Education,” *Religious Education* 76 (1981), 369-81.

⁴ *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1967), p. 19. Emphasis added. See also M. Green, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), pp. 213-24.

⁵ As E. Schussler-Fiorenza writes, “feminist theory insists that all texts are products of an androcentric patriarchal culture and history” (*In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* [New York: Seabury, 1983], p. xv).

⁶ See K. Rahner, “A Basic Interpretation of Vatican II,” *TS* 40 (1979), 717.

ery; to know no longer how to address or refer to God:⁷ these are costs of discipleship for feminists. Anne Carr has perceptively identified women's religious protest and affirmation as a "grace for our times," but, be assured, this is no cheap grace.⁸

If feminism has served to point out the extent to which reason is "standpoint dependent,"⁹ then it is incumbent on us to ask what difference it makes to do theology in light of feminist perspectives. One of the considerations that emerges most consistently in the literature across the disciplines is that women tend to see the world in more relational terms, and thus are more apt to value mutuality, inclusion and wholeness. This, for instance, is the basis for the criticism of theological education originating from a group of women known as the "Cornwall Collective": they contrast an intellectual style formed on a masculine model—objective, impersonal, abstract, oriented toward products rather than process, competitive and elitist—with that toward which women tend:

It (women's intellectual style) attempts to bridge the gulf between objective and subjective, frankly recognizes and speaks from the "I," is open to the nonrational in human experience, is concerned with process as well as product, is contextual and interdisciplinary, flexible in method, collaborative in style, nonhierarchical and nonelitist, concerned with ways to share knowledge and skills rather than hoard expertise.¹⁰

While I think their rhetoric is excessively chiaroscuro, they have, nevertheless, implicitly raised a question of no small complexity: do men and women have different intellectual styles? The social sciences seem to suggest that whatever differences exist are not genetic, but the result of socialization; apparently, men and women have no genetic differences in cognitive structures.¹¹ Secondly, it seems to me that we must refine the

⁷ R. R. Ruether proposes the term "God/ess," a "written symbol intended to combine both the masculine and feminine forms of the word for the divine while preserving the Judeo-Christian affirmation that divinity is one. This term is unpronounceable and inadequate. It is not intended as language for worship, where one might prefer a more evocative term, such as Holy One or Holy Wisdom. Rather it serves here as an analytic sign to point toward that yet unnameable understanding of the divine that would transcend patriarchal limitations and signal redemptive experience for women as well as men" (*Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* [Boston: Beacon, 1983], p. 46). Cf. Alice Walker's brilliant novel, *The Color Purple* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1982), esp. 175-79, in which Shug persuades Celie that God is no old white man, not a he or she, "but a It": "My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it comes to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all" (p. 178).

⁸ "Is a Christian Feminist Theology Possible?" *TS* 43 (1982), 296.

⁹ R. M. Green, *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief*, cited in E. Dodson Gray, *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap* (Wellesley, MA: Roundtable Press), p. 46.

¹⁰ The Cornwall Collective, *Your Daughters Shall Prophesy: Feminist Alternatives in Theological Education* (New York: Pilgrim, 1980), p. 54.

¹¹ See M. L. Hoffman, "Sex Differences in Empathy and Related Behavior," *Psychological Bulletin* (1977), 712-22; M. Brabeck in "Moral Orientation: Alternative Perspectives of Men and Women" (Unpublished ms, 1983) argues that though Carol Gilligan's work, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1982), does indeed enlarge the excessively negative conception of morality offered by Lawrence Kohlberg, by including a concern for interconnection, harmony and non-violence, "research results suggest that this enlarged conception of morality may be less sex specific than Gilligan has claimed" (p. 19). I am indebted to Margaret Gorman for the Hoffman and Brabeck references.

generalizations of the Cornwall Collective by looking at varying ways that individuals mediate their educational experiences, what Hope Jensen Leichter terms "educative style."¹²

Leichter provides five categories for organizing the variant ways individuals initiate, absorb, synthesize and critically appraise various educative influences: (1) temporal integration (varying modes of memory [e.g., minute details with exact sequence and dating or global and diffuse], of pace and speed of learning, and of ability to function on multiple or single channels); (2) the manner in which persons respond to cues from others (whether they are, in Riesman's categories, "outer-directed" or "inner-directed"); (3) the way one appraises the knowledge, attitudes and values suggested in encounters with others (e.g., whether one is naturally critical); (4) the manner in which a person scans and searches the environment in the quest for knowledge (e.g., is one characteristically cautious or wide-ranging?); (5) the way one copes with embarrassment (the extent to which one anticipates embarrassment may well inhibit trying new experiences).

Leichter's categories provide a heuristic tool for describing intellectual styles that do not merely break down along lines of masculine and feminine. Yet, insofar as her categories implicitly deal with patterns of interaction and socialization, then we may well find some quite significant differences in the educative style of men and women. Moreover, her categories, though not exhaustive and certainly subject to refinement, might prove of genuine gain in helping people lodged in an excessively restricted style to name and break out of the patterns imposed by their socialization.

But ultimately, it seems to me, we must move beyond merely identifying different ways of mediating our educational experiences and examine *what it means to be an educated person*. Philosopher Jane Roland Martin argues that, because education, like politics, is defined in relation only to the productive processes of society, its definition thus excludes women, whose sphere has traditionally encompassed the reproductive processes of child care and family life.¹³ She shows how the influential R. S. Peters conceptualizes education in such a manner as to exclude "the teaching, the training, and the socialization of children for which women throughout history have had prime responsibility."¹⁴ Likewise, in defining teaching in terms of a narrow conception of rationality (the giving and understanding of reasons), the "rationality theory" of teaching espoused by such prominent theorists as Israel Scheffler and Thomas Green "makes the education-

¹² "The Concept of Educative Style," *Teachers College Record* 75 (1973), 239-50. For the way this concept figures in a broader concept of education, see Lawrence Cremin, *Public Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), pp. 27-56.

¹³ "Excluding Women from the Educational Realm," *Harvard Educational Review* 52 (1982), 133-48. This builds upon her earlier essay, "Sophie and Emile: A Case Study in History of Educational Thought," *Harvard Educational Review* 51 (1981), 357-72.

¹⁴ "Excluding Women," 141.

al activities of mothers, and by implication mothers themselves, appear nonrational, if not downright irrational."¹⁵ Martin concludes:

Perhaps the most important concern is that, when the educational realm makes women invisible, philosophy of education cannot provide an adequate answer to the question of what constitutes an educated person. . . . An adequate ideal of the educated person must join thought to action, and reason to feeling and emotion. . . . Peters' conception of the educated person is far too narrow to serve as an ideal which guides the educational enterprise and to which value is attached: it provides at best an idea of an educated *mind*, not of an educated *person*, although, to the extent that its concerns are strictly cognitive, even in this sense it leaves much to be desired. . . . When philosophy of education investigates questions about childrearing and the transmission of values, when it develops accounts of gender education to inform its theories of liberal education, when it explores the forms of thinking, feeling, and acting associated with childrearing, marriage, and the family, when the concept of coeducation and concepts such as mothering and nurturance become subjects for philosophical analysis, philosophy of education will be invigorated.¹⁶

By implication Martin challenges us to re-examine what we understand to be the nature and purpose of theological education. The feminist convictions that rationality and personal autonomy must be complemented by caring, nurturance and a sense of relatedness obviously have a direct bearing on theology. Presumably one seeks a theological education in order to enhance one's capacities as a human being to live more faithfully and meaningfully in the world; the question is, however, does the study of theology in our present institutional structures actually foster this? Under what assumptions about an educated person do we operate? Have we implicitly proceeded under the notion that one who is theologically literate is rational, analytical and critical—the traits our culture stereotypically associates with males? Do our curriculum and syllabi suggest that intellectual discipline and rigor also include imagination, creativity and the non-discursive? Does the university (or seminary) reward research and publication because they are more quantifiable and measurable than teaching, which, precisely because it concerns human interaction, inevitably has a mysterious quality?¹⁷ It is my conviction that one of the most significant litmus tests of feminist theology will be how seriously it takes teaching, which has too often been relegated to the periphery of traditional theology, reductionistically regarded as a matter of mere technique and therefore, as undeserving of "hard" thinking. To the contrary: teaching, a matter of disciplined imagination encompassing a wide spectrum of activities, is first and foremost a way of thinking about one's subject in a manner such that knowledge and wisdom might be made accessible.

Underlying many of these concerns is that vexing issue of the relationship between theory and practice, a topic at the center of a provocative work by Edward Farley, *Theologia*, which I find to be especially resonant

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 145. For an insightful alternative to a narrowly rationalistic philosophy of teaching, see E. W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination* (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 147-48. See her "The Ideal of the Educated Person," *Educational Theory* 31 (1981), 97-114.

¹⁷ See my "Teaching: The Heat of Religious Education," *Religious Education* 78 (1983), forthcoming.

with feminist theological and educational perspectives.¹⁸ He persuasively argues the thesis that we need to recover a sense of theology as sapiential knowledge (a believing understanding rooted in God) and as dialectical activity. This theological understanding, the ecclesial counterpart to an educational *paideia*, contrasts sharply with our present state of a "melange of sciences pertaining to the education of leaders."¹⁹ His concern that theological education is an "atomism of subjects without a clear rationale, end, or unity" dominated by the "pragmatic, strategy-oriented ethos of theory-practice" and overseen by theologians caught in the "scholarly-guild mind set"²⁰ poses challenging questions about how to break theology out of the parochialism of its clerical paradigm which has led to "enormous problems of conceiving how theology has anything to do with institutions, human beings, or culture outside the leadership of the church."²¹

In conclusion, the clarity with which Farley has posed the questions and situated them in historical contest—if not framed the answers—articulates what I believe is also at the heart of feminist, educational criticism of theology: how can theology be a way of wisdom in knowledge and action? His historical archaeology includes no women—an omission not without significance for his thesis. But when writers of a future generation write the history of theology of the late twentieth century, I believe they will recognize that the long-delayed visibility of women speaking "in a different voice" contributed indispensably to the recreation of theology as sapiential knowledge. May Lady Wisdom be our guide!

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WOMEN IN THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Women in theological research are in some ways the subject and in other ways the object of this essay. As subjects, women are claiming their rightful place by practicing their discipline, and are creating a situation where their demand to be accepted as colleagues by men practicing theology and organized in groups such as the CTSA cannot be ignored. What it means to be "accepted as colleagues," neither patronized nor put down, is not entirely clear. After all, our gender colors all our relationships. The assumptions that come with long-nurtured and especially useful stereotypes are not easily laid aside, even when the stereotypes are declared to be unjust and are consciously rejected. (In some ways it helps that women, like men, are usually older by the time they make their mark in

¹⁸ Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 19.

²¹ E. Farley, "Theology and Practice Outside the Clerical Paradigm," in D. S. Browning, ed., *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church, and World* (New York: Harper, 1983), p. 27. See also his "The Reform of Theological Education as an Educational Task," *Theological Education* 15 (1981), 93-117.