FEMINISM AND THEOLOGICAL LANGUAGE

In the light of the convention theme this workshop focused on the question of language and its relationship to feminist theology. There were two presentations.

The first presentation, by Mary Hines, pointed out the affinity between the linguistic turn and feminist theology, exemplified this through a discussion of the question of the naming of the deity and the related question of the naming of power, and raised a question about the significance of feminist theology for the reformation of the whole church.

Central to feminism, and in particular to its religious manifestation, is the fundamental insight that those who control the language have the power and that changing unjust and oppresive structures involves changing the language system that legitimates them. Feminist theology concerns itself a great deal with language and its power to shape human consciousness. Although it is a theology that places women's experience at the center, it recognizes that who we are and what we experience are powerfully informed by the language system into which we are born. With other "post-modern" theologies[1] feminist theology goes beyond the centrality of the autonomous ego, detached from time and space and prior to language, that has dominated much post-Enlightenment theology. It is concerned with human beings in relationship and thus is an engaged theology, politically and socially involved. In its awareness of the relationship between language and experience and the political and social consequences of that relationship, feminist theology is a key example of a critical theology which grows out of the insights of the linguistic turn.

Feminist theology points out that our religious language, particularly our language about God, was developed by men within a patriarchal world-view. It recognizes that this religious language divinely legitimates human power dynamics based on the hierarchial subordination enshrined in patriarchy.[2] For this reason, language reform, particularly of God-language, is a central concern of feminist theology. The naming of God in exclusively masculine terms has grounded and legitimated later patriarchal doctrinal and liturgical formulations as well as hierarchical and subordinationist church structures. Naming God as masculine has ensured that women would be permanently assigned to the role of the "other," unable to image God in God's headship of the human community.

Feminist theology insists that our metaphors for God are no longer adequate and must be changed. We must use a plurality of images so that no one image can

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[1]David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) 76-78; 82-85.

[2]Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread not Stone* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984) 5.

be mistaken for the reality. God-talk is metaphorical language.[3] The basic principle should be to look for and use metaphors that image a different power structure, that point to relationships of equality and mutuality. Since issues of power are intimately connected to the question of the naming of God, feminist theology also seeks to redifine and to rename power. Power is not inherently connected to violence and domination, but can also evoke love and nurturance.

The paper concluded by suggesting that we are at a critical stage in the church's history. Rahner's suggestion that we are on the brink of the third stage of the church's history, a "world church," indicates the critical nature of our time.[4] To meet the challenge of reading the signs of the times for today a radical overhaul is needed in the symbols, narratives and metaphors that make up our religious tradition. Feminist theologians and liturgists have already begun serious work creating new symbols and retrieiving ancient symbols and metaphors, but thus far these efforts have remained all too marginal to the wider theological and church community. Feminist courses, feminist liturgies are widely perceived to pertain only to women. Until a feminist perspective permeates as a foundational concern what is considered mainstream theology or liturgy, the critical reformation needed by the whole church will not come to be. It will not be seen that these are not "women's issues" but that the effects of power and domination enshrined in masculine religious language confront and cripple relationships in the whole church community of men and women. The whole church needs these insights if it is to be able to become the pluralistic world church demanded by this critical interruptive stage of the church's history.

The second presentation, by Carmel McEnroy, further specified the connection between language and feminist theology by reference to the works of several feminist theologians, particularly Mary Daly.

The linguistic turn highlights the significance of language in structuring experience. Recognizing the reciprocal relationship between language and experience, feminist theologians pose several questions. Whose experience? Who generates language? When patriarchal language negates women's experience, what alternatives are open to women? In increasing numbers women are realizing with Audre Lord that "one cannot dismantle the master's house with the master's tools" (*This Bridge Called My Back,* cited by Nelle Morton in *The Journey Is Home,* p. xxv). Language is a key tool, and Mary Daly suggests "linguistic therapy" and a "kick in the imagination" so as to devise a language that adequately captures our experience and serves as a corrective to the distortion presented when male experience (which is partial) parades as the whole.

The first step in the process is captured by Alice Walker—"You have to git man off your eyeball, before you can see anything a'tall" (*The Color Purple,* p. 168). A subsequent step to naming ourselves as "women," not "men," and to recognizing the limitations of the "word of God" as set forth in the words of men is challenging the idea of an all-male God. Biblical scholars, such as Phyllis

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[3]See Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), and Sallie McFague *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

[4]In *Plurality and Ambiguity* David Tracy refers to it as a critical interruptive period.

Trible, Mary Rose D'Angelo, and Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza are helpful in drawing attention to the wealth of biblical metaphors for God—e.g., baker-woman, seamstress, womb, midwife, motherhen, etc. These and others which are not gender specific serve to broaden the metaphorical pool and to lessen the danger of literalization and consequent irrelevancy, as has happened to the metaphor of God the Father. In *Metaphorical Theology,* Sallie McFague points out that where the metaphor has been flattened out, made one-dimensional, and frozen, so that the tension between the "is" and "is not" is lost, it no longer functions as it was intended.

Several overarching metaphors capture the feminist venture: e.g., Alice Walker's *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens,* Sara Maitland's *A Map Of The New Country,* Jean Shinoda Bolen's *Goddesses In Everywoman,* Carol Christ's *Diving Deep And Surfacing,* Naomi Goldenburg's *Changing Of The Gods,* and the Canadian Feminist Quarterly, *Fireweed,* to mention but a few. Mary Daly summarizes the erasure and oppression of women in the metaphor of "Goddess Murder," and her quest is to "Re-Member the Goddess in Everywoman." She is not advocating a return to primitive goddess worship but the personal and communal becoming of every woman in discovering her own unique code. This is similar to Nelle Morton's realization that *The Journey Is Home,* and we make the road as we go.

An essential element in this process is that of women hearing one another to speech. Here again, Morton's contribution is significant. "In the beginning was not the Word. In the beginning was the hearing" (p. 41). This is a deep hearing (a "third ear") behind woman experience that empowers us to bring it to expression, breaking through political and social structures and imaging a new system. In this understanding, God is not the silent, hidden, withdrawn, *deus absconditus,* on whom we must wait until "he" deigns to speak, but the hearing God—hearing us to our own responsible word. So as to facilitate the process of woman hearing one another to speech above the din of patriarchy and androcentricism, Mary Daly attempts to function as much as possible in an all-female environment, the context of "gynergy" in which her words are generated, as exemplified in *Gyn/ecology* and *Pure Lust,* where she lays out her basic method of deconstruction and reconstruction.

Mary Daly figured prominently in this workshop presentation for two reasons. Daly was the first female member of the CTSA to force her entrance into the assembly in 1966, despite threats to call the police. Daly's counterthreat to call the press won the day. Women attending the CTSA today in increasing numbers, presenting papers, and hearing some of our questions being addressed in major sessions need to re-member our brave foresister, Mary Daly, that crone, hag, witch, spinster, fury, amazon who dared to change the character of the CTSA. While Daly now considers herself a radical post-Christian feminist, she is one of the prime movers of the linguistic turn of feminism and a significant voice from the periphery that cannot be ignored by the revisionist center without peril.

Feminist scholars note the correlation between the Christian tradition and societal practice in the sense that it is the same patriarchal language and mentality that structure both in a way that negates women's experience. Furthermore, the

Christian patriarchal ideology legitimates the subjugation and oppression of women in church and society. This poses serious questions. Is Christianity inherently patriarchal and androcentric so that women can never be accepted as full human beings within it in a way that is "saving" for us? Or is Jesus' basic message one of liberation for women, which was distorted very early on by the prevalent patriarchy of his time, but which can be reclaimed by women in a revision of language and consequent systematic change? How one answers those questions generally decides whether one is revisionist or a radical feminist. Feminism can be seen, as suggested in Anne Patrick's plenary address, as the "turn beyond the linguistic turn," the turn to the oppressed, which is already underway and needs to be heard and incorporated into theology as a whole.

The discussion expanded the references to the need for the renaming of power by pointing out that there has been extensive work in this area both by secular and religious feminists. Much discussion centered around the need to expand the conversation beyond groups such as the one gathered, all of whom were aware and convinced of the importance of feminist concerns.

MARY E. HINES
Washington Theological Union
M. CARMEL McENROY
St. Meinrad School of Theology