

WOMEN CREATING THEOLOGY

This workshop was the result of a desire voiced by the women of the CTSA in Philadelphia to reflect together on the way being a woman influences how women do theology. Many women and men perceive that there is a new creative movement in theology stemming from women theologians. It is this creativity, nursed in the particular experiences of women theologians, with which we wanted to grapple. As the workshop took shape, we decided to ask several women who work in different settings to share with us their perceptions of how their own experience impacts the way they do theology both in the classroom and on paper. The reflections of these women were to lead directly to common conversation on this issue of the links between women's experience and the shape of theology.

This topic appears to be peculiarly relevant if one can judge from the fact that one third of the conference participants, over 130 people, attended. However, it raised more issues than it was able to address. I will summarize the contributions of the panelists, then the discussion, and indicate the kinds of issues that emerged as a way forward.

The panelists were Anne E. Patrick from Carleton College, Mary Ann Hinsdale, formerly of St. John's Seminary now from Holy Cross, Judith A. Dwyer from Weston School of Theology, and Cathleen Flynn, from Regis College in Toronto. They represented the experiences of an undergraduate religious studies department, a free standing seminary, a seminary in a cluster setting, and the work of continuing education for people in ministry, respectively. All the panelists took time to comment first on the impact of each specific environment, the "brie and chablis" shadow of Harvard Yard, the life of rural Minnesota. They reminded us that every theologian works in the interplay of self and surroundings. They all reflected on the particular characteristics of their students, and fellow faculty. However, beyond these experiences, which could as readily be offered by our male colleagues, the panel focused on their experience as women.

Anne Patrick spoke about the way a broadly based undergraduate curriculum in religious studies kept her rethinking the basic issues in theology. Yet, as a person who works outside of a Catholic setting, she felt more aware of the biases against Catholicism. Within the commitment to quality education, she noted that women students have a special claim on our energies in a co-educational context. She also noted the importance of contributing service to non-credit classes in theology for women in the community. Finally, she pointed out how important it is for women who are relatively isolated in terms of academic colleagues to find women who can read and work with each other.

Mary Ann Hinsdale lifted up a number of interesting aspects of her work at St. John's. As she taught broadly in systematics, she found herself moving from

doing courses devoted to feminist theology to mainstreaming feminist scholarship in the major courses. Doing this requires rethinking and sometimes challenging the accepted canon of texts for study. Many women are struggling with this issue, and with it two other issues that appear simultaneously. They are the matter of appropriate pedagogy, and attentiveness to the politics of the situation. Out of this, Hinsdale found her research interests pursuing the questions of how the disenfranchised can be included, what the church would look like if they were, and so, questions about ecclesiology.

St. John's is now closed. Hinsdale reported her experience there in terms not unfamiliar to other women. She spoke of mixed messages, and an erosion of welcome. The ambiguous messages came from official church documents that swing from the negative statements about the presence of women in seminaries issued, for example, by Bishop Marshall to the positive voice of *Partners in Redemption*. The ambiguity was also closer by, however, in the way that both students and colleagues affirmed her, yet perceived her as a threat. She likened the situation to that of the Syro-Phoenician woman in the Gospel, the foreigner, who nonetheless begged the crumbs from the master's table. Again, her research interests appear, and her concern for advocacy for those who seek theological education, but are not traditional ordination candidates. She raised the issue of stewardship over theological education. Finally, she urged us to document the stories and contributions of women to Catholic theology in the past twenty-five years.

Judith Dwyer said that Weston's commitment to collaboration made the roles of the laity and of women in ministry live issues. Ecumenical relations are also under discussion in the Boston cluster. One notes that here, too, the ecclesiology issues surface immediately in their practical form. However, Dwyer herself is a moral theologian. She's interested in the problem of the public church and the transformation of culture. Influenced by Margaret Farley and Beverley Wildung Harrison, she finds important issues such as power and justice, the intersections of sexism, classism and racism, economics and family life, and sex and social ethics. She called us to be more imaginative, to seek new symbols and new patterns of relationship.

Cathleen Flynn also brought up the collaborative support and ecumenical challenge she experiences. She noted that women are bearers of a sense of planetary vision and responsibility. Women are raising new questions to our culture. She said that in a sexist world she has come to trust her intuition and to explore her sense of bodily unease when something is not quite right. This is a signal for asking questions, whether about teaching, curriculum or college life. She spoke of developing a sense of authority for herself, and so being able to work for systemic and personal changes. These are insights shared by many of the women students in her program at Regis who make their concerns recognized over against often hierarchical and dualistic university structures. Finally, she reminded us of the importance of taking women's proposals for thesis topics seriously, especially when they appear distant from the accepted path. They too may be working out intuitions and insights that may forge a new road ahead.

Two topics surface in all the panelists—who we support and are supported by, and the question of the church. The problem of pedagogy also recurs. The dis-

cussion spoke to these as well. Women wanted to know what the purpose and message of a seminary is today, especially for women and other non-traditional students. They reflected on working within seminaries and other institutional structures for ecclesial change versus working outside them. One woman said that her experience teaching in an African seminary involved the same double messages noted by the panel. She felt the ecclesial problems clearly crossed cultural boundaries. Other women noted that fellow faculty members often misnamed real issues. A woman might be told she is feeling unappreciated, when what she really wants is power. Messages are mixed for faculty and for students in the traditional seminary setting.

Some women have gathered recently to reflect about creating alternative institutions that could offer theological education for the many women who seek it today. Women at the Gregorian now are engaged in forming a center in Rome for women. Concern for women's colleges and women undergraduates was also voiced. In any form, women's education remains tied to the politics of power and money, as Virginia Woolf so clearly recognized.

Both in the seminary and other settings, women also were concerned about the links between curriculum, feminist insights and pedagogy. More than one woman has found herself tripping off a raised platform while trying to involve the students in discussion. It was agreed later that pedagogy is an issue we must address more fully.

Subsequent reflection on the workshop at the women's breakfast has now led to proposals for following up at least four areas of concern. One is to push the problem of the relationship between women's experience and the construction of theology more deeply. The workshop only initiated this discussion. We need a more systematic reflection. A second is clearly pedagogy. A third is the suggestion that we document women's stories and contributions as Mary Ann Hinsdale suggested. Last, we need to engage more fully in the complex of issues that make up the politics of power. The workshop itself did no more, but no less, than break ground for the issues we now need to pursue.

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