

BOOK DISCUSSION:
"Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks"
Racism and American Feminism
by Barbara H. Andolsen

The presenter, Sally Ann McReynolds, described the major themes of the book¹ and offered her reflections, questions, and critiques of the material. Barbara H. Andolsen clarified significant points and elaborated on aspects she felt she would want to further develop. This report summarizes the oral presentations of both women.

McReynolds noted that Andolsen's treatment of the interstructuration between racism and American feminism offered a very promising basis for ethical and theological reflection. This is due in large measure to the rigorous and incisive presentation of the historical and theological facts that characterize the faces of racism in the women's suffrage movement. McReynolds described the tasks the author addresses in the book:

First, delineating the facts and voices of racism in the women's suffrage movement. The author presents, as examples of women who carry both the voice for women suffrage and racist attitudes, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Anna Howard Shaw.

Second, offering an ethical analysis of the dilemma that was faced by white suffragettes. On the one hand groups do have a right to advance their own cause, but just how far can groups go when they encroach on the rights of others?

Third, presenting the black woman's perspective on the feminist movement in the United States. The fact is that white women's agenda has frequently ignored aspects of life in the black community. Such aspects include the victimization of black women by rape, the oppressiveness of their workplaces, and even the concept of beauty, which is based on the ideal of whiteness and white characteristics.

McReynolds briefly presented the theological implications when we realize that racism persists throughout the theological enterprise. We need to ask ourselves who the theological institutions are available to. There also is the question of language in the methodology of theology itself, particularly of feminist theology.

The author criticizes Mary Daly. In *Beyond God the Father*, Daly sees a movement in feminist theology that includes preparation, castration, and exorcism. Daly says it is necessary to castrate the male image of God, the male image of life, and sexually that one image is the act of castration. The author finds this

¹Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "*Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks.*" *Racism and American Feminism* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

problematic to black women. It impinges upon black women's consciousness differently than upon some white women's.

The author warns us we must also be careful of the image of "the true woman" qualities that emerged from within the women's suffrage movement. At that time if you wanted to get to vote you wanted to be the educated, cultured, home-loving white woman. This image can be used wrongly, even within the feminist movement, when one speaks of a new woman who will "have a voice, have a more peaceful, loving, and kind world."

Finally, McReynolds found quite helpful the author's reflections on the importance of bringing forward communities of accountability. Should this happen, feminist and theological groups that discuss racism might well find that they can be immobilized in the quicksand of anger and guilt. We need to pledge ourselves to personal and social repentance in theological discourse, and avail ourselves of the poetry, music and movement that are both ritual and symbol.

Andolsen made clear to the group that she believes racism was part-and-parcel of the women's suffrage movement all along. She does not see it as just the problem of a generation shift particular to the second generation of white women in the suffrage movement, those who didn't have personal experience with the abolitionist movement. She believes that white women's racism—the racism of women like Elizabeth Cady Stanton—was kept in check by the relationships they had with black people, in terms of social reform, in what was a broad-based national coalition that broke down in the wake of the Civil War.

Racism was evident in the decision by white women to start the National Woman Suffrage Association and break from the Equal Rights Association, which had a broad-based human liberation agenda. Members of the National Woman Suffrage Association got very frustrated by the tension and disagreement surrounding the priority given to passage of the 14th and 15th amendments. The National Woman Suffrage Association wanted to focus on one single agenda topic: women's rights. Andolsen sees this as the breakdown of a national community of accountability.

Black persons, both male and female, were usually welcomed to join in the white women's agenda for women's rights. Now, Cady Stanton unleashed what she had been holding in check for a very long time: a lot of ethnic and racial prejudice. There was a real intersection of class, race, and ethnicity, since Cady Stanton could deal with middle class blacks. However, she couldn't abide those she viewed as her "inferiors," in culture, leadership abilities, or education. Cady Stanton experienced intense resentment that such inferiors, especially black males, had what she described as easy access to the ballot when she did not.

An issue raised by Andolsen is the breakdown in the structures of accountability that were evident when white women withdrew from the angry debates over their priorities and started their own association. Is there not the need for communities of mutual accountability? Society today is so overwhelmingly segregated in so many ways that it is nearly impossible to find communities where we can get honest feedback. Most parishes do not have a racial balance that allows people to deal with racism in a way that keeps one honest and accountable.

Another extremely important issue is the legitimacy, but also the limits, of white women's self-assertion in a racist society. Andolsen argues white women

do have the right to give priority to their own issues for their own liberation. But in a racist society, structured on class, what are the limits of white feminist self-assertion?

Andolsen feels that if she were to write the book again she would deal in a more adequate way with economic issues and the interplay in society between education and economic opportunity.

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