

NEW VITALITY: THE CHALLENGE FROM FEMINIST THEOLOGY

The goal of feminist theology is to put itself out of business. Like evangelism, feminism aims to become unnecessary. This will be a reality when theology is as inclusive of women's experience, in all its diversity, as it is of men's. Since feminism is understood in very different ways, grasping the challenge from feminist theology means our first question is foundational: which feminism? The second question is the heart of the challenge to theology as a vital discipline: what does feminist theology want? My third question is raised for feminist theologians and everyone who is open to our project. How can we best interpret our experience of the loss of meaning?

I. FOUNDATIONAL QUESTION

In broadest outline, feminism is both a coordinated set of ideas and a practical plan of action rooted in women's critical awareness of how a culture controlled, in meaning and action, by men for their own perceived advantage oppresses women and dehumanizes men. That is, feminism is a critical *evaluation* of the experienced patriarchal world. Although comprehensive, feminism is expressed in a variety of forms (for example, socialist, ecological, liberal) that reveal two basic types.¹

The case for feminism is usually made from one of these two primary perspectives: relational or individualist. Ideas and projects in the *relational* feminist tradition feature a nonhierarchical, egalitarian vision of social organization. This tradition emphasizes women's rights *as women*, defined principally by their nurturing qualities or by their assumed affinity with nature; and it insists on women's distinctive contributions to society. Whether these qualities are rooted in nature or socialization is a debated issue. Carol Gilligan's position resembles this line of argument. *Individualist* views and aims, on the other hand, posit the individual as the basic unit of society. This tradition emphasizes the rights of individuals as *individuals*, downplays all socially defined roles, and minimizes discussion of sex-linked qualities. It is careful to distinguish sex (biology: female, male) from gender (the socially constructed meaning of sex: "female" and "masculine"). Enactment of the Equal Rights Amendment is a political priority of these feminists.²

In summary, the case for feminism is usually made from two different perspectives. Individualists argue for the moral equality of women and men who share

¹Sandra M. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991) 6-31.

²Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14/11 (Autumn 1988) 119-54.

the same human nature and, therefore, deserve equal rights. Relational feminists affirm equality, yet stress "the difference difference makes." That is, they respect the unique socialization our culture gives women and men and insist that society value women's special contribution with the same status and rewards it confers on men for their contribution. It is wary of claims for the "complementarity" of women and men because, most often, that term refers to women completing men by serving men's interests. It is from this relational perspective that some African-American feminists discuss their ambivalence about giving priority to women's rights when racism, sexism, and classism are so inseparable in issues of human rights.

Both individual and relational feminism have strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, asking "which feminism?" does not mean choosing only one. Rather, it asks us to notice the biases and strengths of whatever type of feminism informs any theological position. For example, relational values sometimes romanticize women's qualities, and individual values can exaggerate autonomy. Authentic feminism, I believe, promotes autonomy for the sake of genuine relationship.

Feminists, themselves, are interested in these creative conflicts and willing to explore the assumptions of their own methodology.³ For example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, professor of history and director of women's studies at Emory University, has just published *Feminism without Illusion*,⁴ in which she points out the inadequacy of individualist theory for decision making.

It is not easy to reconcile the feminist metaphors of motherhood and community with the feminist defense of abortion on the grounds of absolute individual right. . . . No precedent in individualist theory helps us to understand the issue, for the men upon whom individualism was predicated do not bear children.

This lack of precedent prompts Fox-Genovese to explore "some ways of imagining and protecting the rights of the individual as social, not private, rights."⁵ This lack of precedent, which is a source of creative energy, brings me to the heart of the challenge feminism raises for all theology.

II. THEOLOGICAL PROJECT

When feminists desire to identify themselves as Christian and Catholic, we face a religious context that relates to us in contradictory and conflicting ways. While affirming women as baptized into Christ as fully as men, church teaching and practice also ignores, demeans, and even oppresses women. It is this experience of a patriarchal religious world that feminist theologians evaluate in a comprehensive project that calls for a complete transformation of theology from within. What feminist theology wants is a total conversion of theology.

³See Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox-Keller, eds., *Conflicts in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall, 1990).

⁴Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Feminism without Illusion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

⁵*Ibid.*, 9, 83.

How will this happen? It has already begun in the feminist theological project that can be schematized in six logical steps or tasks⁶ that are exemplified by the work of many here today. Because of time constraints, I can mention only a few examples. Step one is to notice and demonstrate the fact that women have been ignored in the field. By now, this is obvious to most scholars.⁷ Second, a theologian shows that the sources are characterized by much hostility, diminishment, frivolity, or romantic mystification. Rosemary Ruether's *Religion and Sexism*⁸ has become a classic example of this task. Third, scholars search out and write about women lost in the field or overlooked in scholarship regarding a particular theological topic. For example, research on discernment has been almost synonymous, for many, with Ignatius Loyola. Now, feminist scholarship reveals that discernment is richly developed in Catherine of Siena, for example.⁹ These three early tasks must continue, of course, as the next ones progress.

Tasks four, five, and six are the most profoundly challenging, and the ones feminist theology is currently pursuing with greatest vigor. The fourth task is to revise the reading of old texts by asking new questions which cause the texts to lose their power to exclude or restrict women. For example, recent scholarship on Teresa of Avila's prose style reveals that what male commentary has admired as "feminine charm" (self-depreciation and self-irony) might better be understood as deliberate rhetorical strategies of empowerment.¹⁰ Our most fundamental problematic text, of course, is scripture. As Sandra Schneiders frames the question, "How can scripture, once its androcentric, patriarchal, and misogynist content has been identified, function normatively for Christians, especially women?"¹¹ New questions must surely be raised, and, to quote Schneiders again, "Our tradition suggests that nothing, no matter how seemingly sacrosanct, is beyond question. Certainly the decision that the Mosaic law need not be imposed on Gentile converts will never be surpassed in radicality. Ordaining women priests would be far less innovative." These new questions involve the hermeneutical process of entering the dynamics of the text, for example,

not as an apodictic answer to our questions, but as a pedagogical guide for working

⁶Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 154-55.

⁷See, e.g., Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). Brown acknowledges that "it is a comfortable and dangerous illusion to assume that, in much of the evidence [of the Greco-Roman world], the presence of women is even sensed by its male authors" (xvii).

⁸Rosemary Radford Ruether, ed., *Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974).

⁹Sandra M. Schneiders, "Spiritual Discernment in The Dialogue of Saint Catherine of Siena," *Horizons* 9/1 (Spring 1982) 47-59. Recovery of women lost in history is exemplified in Sherrin Marshall, ed., *Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

¹⁰Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Femininity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). Weber demonstrates that Teresa's rhetoric of femininity was self-conscious, alternatively defensive and affiliative, and above all subversive; it allowed her to break the Pauline silence (16).

¹¹Schneiders, *Beyond Patching*, 2.

out our own answers. How did the early Christians struggle with such issues as Mosaic observance . . . [or] church order? Maybe what we need to learn from the text is not what we are to do but how we are to go about deciding what to do?¹²

A fifth task is the methodological challenge that forces theology to redefine borders, goals, and consequences.¹³ For example, we previously assumed scripture was a sacred border or norm, and now we see that that norm itself must be challenged. Another example would be the definition of theology as faith seeking understanding. Given its pervasive male-centeredness, must theology not also become faith seeking purification and conversion?

A final task is to work toward an integrated field which is not reduced by its prejudices against women, ethnic groups, other religions, or anything else, but which represents humanity in all its messy diversity.

In summary, transformed theology will be inclusive of what has been ignored or neglected; it will reappropriate what has been alienated or demeaned.¹⁴ This goal seems a long way away, so I speak my last challenge to myself, as a Catholic feminist theologian, and to all of you who identify with this need for a total conversion of theology.

III. SPIRITUAL DARKNESS

We all experience the struggle, the frustration, and the temptation to quit that is so strong, on some days, when we grasp the magnitude of the project of transforming all theology. But even more, in letting go of past certitudes in order to move into an unknown theological future, we experience a profound loss of existential meaning. We wonder: What does this mean? How can we best interpret this experience? Can we authentically name it a dark night of the spirit as described by John of the Cross?¹⁵

John, and all great teachers of the spiritual life, try to help us find new meaning when our convictions about faith no longer hold. When the way we have made the meaning of our *selves* as Catholic theologians seems totally inadequate and, therefore, our very self is questioned or threatened, might we appropriately contemplate John of the Cross's advice to those who have devoted themselves to the life of faith?

¹²Ibid., 67-68.

¹³See, e.g., Susan Ross, "'Then Honor God in Your Body' (1 Cor 6:20): Feminist and Sacramental Theology on the Body," *Horizons* 16/1 (Spring 1989) 7-27. Ross describes the feminist critique of Roman Catholic sacramental theology's fundamental principle and offers a corrective.

¹⁴Focus on integration is particularly evident in the area of spirituality. See Joann Wolski Conn, *Spirituality and Personal Maturity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). For feminist spirituality that includes more than Christian tradition, see Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, eds., *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns of Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

¹⁵This suggestion is an extension of the thesis of Constance FitzGerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," in Joann Wolski Conn, ed., *Women's Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986) 287-311.

These proficients are still very lowly . . . because the gold of the spirit is not purified and illumined. . . . Wishing to . . . clothe them with the new . . . God leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in . . . anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings.¹⁶

Could this "intellect in darkness" not describe one who must relinquish the entire male-centered theology of God? Surely, a "memory in emptiness" fits the experience of one whose memory of former christology and Christian anthropology brings emptiness at the realization of their profound inadequacy or brings pain at their use to restrict women.

How can theology as an intellectually vital discipline—that is, how can we—respond to this darkness? John of the Cross's advice is an invitation to believe that "although the soul . . . has not the support of any particular interior light of the intellect or of any exterior guide . . . love alone . . . is what guides and moves it and makes it soar to God in an unknown way. . . ." ¹⁷ May our energetic, creative love in this darkness somehow be redemptive for the world.¹⁸

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¹⁶"The Dark Night," book 2, chapter 3, number 3, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1973).

¹⁷"The Dark Night," book 2, chapter 25, number 4.

¹⁸For technical assistance with this paper I would like to thank Joseph Jarrell, and for editing and creative help I am grateful to Walter E. Conn.