

SEMINAR ON THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

In line with seminar discussions of the previous six years concerning the role of experience (especially women's experience) in the articulation of theological anthropology, the seminar focussed on the theme "Theology, Women's Experience and Suffering." Ann O'Hara Graff (Loyola University Institute of Pastoral Studies) presented "An Assessment of Women's Experience as a Starting Point for Theology." Patricia L. Wismer (Seattle University) presented "For Women in Pain: A Feminist Theology of Suffering." Mary Ann Hinsdale (College of the Holy Cross) served as moderator.

Graff's paper began by reminding us of feminist theology's insight from the late 1960s: that theological anthropology's abstract, universal claims to describe "man" or human nature was not at all abstract, but was the particular experience of the people who had access to the academy and were able to become published theologians (almost exclusively white males with ecclesiastical privilege). The work of the late 1970s through the mid 1980s unmasked this abstraction still further, as it revealed that the embedded systems of power, class, race and gender interests also had to be taken into account in theological reflection.

In taking up the question of how to name women's experience, Graff presented three essential factors theologians must consider with regard to doing theology from "women's experience": *social location* (i.e., how class, race or sexual orientation change gender constructs), *ideology and language* (i.e., how women's experience is further problematized by mythology and the prejudicial nature of language) and *the quest for human wholeness* (i.e., how reappropriation of the body, the correlation of affect with reason, and concern for connectedness have influenced the content of gender constructs). A review of the insights and critical work being done by feminist scholars accompanied her discussion of each of these areas, with special attention given to the issue of violence against women. This issue is especially problematic because women's internalization of physical and psychological domination, combined with social location of class and race have created the particularly distressing situation of the white woman oppressor.

Graff's conclusion was that while there is no unified body of women's experience (there are only multiple forms and multiple dimensions), this multiplicity can be "mapped" by attending to these three factors. She also suggested that "women's experience" understood in this way can contribute and recreate theology in three ways: in relation to *revelation* (where women's experience is a critical corrective and constructive element); in *prophetic human transformation* (where theological traditions and social systems are transformed beyond simple desire for access, status or power, to the humble images of the common table, the one bread and the discipleship of equals); in the *mystical encounter with God* (where retrieved and new analogies "break open and encircle us, to lead us in the dance from, into and out of ourselves toward the riotous plenty that is God").

Two questions emerged in the discussion: whether "women's experience" had been sufficiently defined and whether there was a universal experience of female sexuality, or to what extent this was culturally conditioned. With regard to the first question, there was consensus that Ann Graff's whole approach indicated that the complexity and multiplicity of "women's experience" negated the possibility of "definition." Her paper went beyond mere description, however, in its attempt to assess the critical learnings of feminist scholars in their attempts to bridge the gap between the thematization of experience and the experience itself and the naming of constructive contributions to theology which have stemmed from "women's experience." Graff clarified with respect to the second question, that though female reproductive experiences may cut across cultures (i.e., menstruation and birth), their meanings may be different.

Patricia Wismer's paper concerned the development of a feminist theology of suffering. She maintained that any adequate Christian theology of suffering must have *experiential* relevance because Jesus himself developed and shared his thoughts, healing words and actions with real-life men and women who suffered. As a "reality control," Wismer described the suffering of eight women who have touched her life, suggesting that if a theological position or its implication would function to increase their suffering, this would count heavily against it. The experiences of these women served as constant "conversation partners" throughout the discussion which followed.

Wismer used Eric Cassell's definition of suffering: "the state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person." It is the effect which suffering has on the total self (physical pain, emotional trauma, social isolation and spiritual crisis) which renders it suffering. Since none of the women she described had been well served by traditional Christian responses to suffering, she spent some time reviewing both implicit and explicit responses from the tradition.

Implicitly, Christian responses to suffering are found in the doctrines of God and christology (specifically, soteriology). The problem of theodicy and the various solutions which have emerged in the Christian tradition are seen as inadequate by feminist theology. They fail to take account of the underlying domination-submission relation between God and the world. Neither does the solution of "a God who suffers with us" completely satisfy feminists. Though a suffering God provides comfort, companionship, and perhaps even hope, no explanation is given concerning how God's suffering eliminates or mitigates suffering. Referring to the radical critique of atonement theories offered by Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker (e.g. if God the Father sent his Son to suffer and die for our sins, how does one escape the conclusion that God is not only a sadist but also a divine child abuser?), Wismer highlighted the need to work out a theology of the cross which does not even implicitly glorify suffering.

Wismer elucidated the *explicit* responses of Christian theology (found most often in pastoral contexts) by referring to the cases of the eight suffering women. These responses included: masochism, cheap forgiveness, apathy, expectation of miracles and a plethora of "easy answers."

In the face of such responses, two opposing viewpoints concerning suffering have developed among feminist theologians. The "never again" approach pas-

sionately crusades against the ideal of self-sacrifice, even when it ostensibly has been undertaken for the sake of life. As Brown and Parker maintain, "It is not acceptance that gives life: it is *commitment to life* that gives life." The "suffering: part of the web of life" approach (illustrated by Carol Christ's and Nelle Morton's experience of the Goddess) emphasize acceptance of suffering and the sense that being committed to life includes accepting death.

Wismer feels that both approaches provide needed emphases for a feminist theology of suffering. Her proposal argues that feminist theology should approach suffering within a framework created by the tension of both positions. Within this framework, four questions should be posed: (1) What are the causes of my suffering and how can they be eliminated? (2) How can I find meaning in suffering and grow through it? (3) When and how should I take on suffering I could avoid? (4) Why am I suffering and who suffers with me?

The implications of using such a methodological framework for a theological anthropology "for women in pain" suggested rethinking traditional Christian anthropological approaches to such topics as embodiment, the self, virtues, sin and grace. Wismer illustrated how this is being done by drawing upon the contributions of theologians Carter Heyward, Beverly Harrison, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Susan Thistlethwaite, Rita Nakashima Brock and psychologist Alice Miller. The ensuing discussion lauded the paper's bringing together the concrete data of experience (the eight women) with theoretical critique and reconstruction of the tradition.

A brief business meeting followed. It was decided that seminar direction through a five-member steering committee would continue. Mary Ann Hinsdale will serve as contact person and liaison with CTSA officers. It was decided to have two sessions next year, one focusing on the methodological problem concerning the movement from particular experience to the articulation of theological anthropology, and another which would take a concrete anthropological doctrine, using concrete experience as the starting point for theologizing. It was also decided to move ahead on the seminar publication project (on "Theological Anthropology from a Feminist Perspective") which was suggested last year. Mary Ann Hinsdale and Mary Catherine Hilkert will contact those who have already expressed interest and solicit contributions from others to fill any gaps in topic coverage early this fall.

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