

EXPERIENCE AS A RESOURCE FOR FEMINIST THOUGHT

Two presenters, Professors Susan Secker and Jeanette Rodriguez-Holguin, colleagues from the University of Seattle, reflected dialogically on how "women's experience" is used in theology. Each presented her own paper followed by reflection on what she had learned in working together on the project, sharing not only their conclusions but the process by which they reached these conclusions. Their presentation was an exercise of collaborative scholarship made possible through mutual trust and honesty. Approximately fifty participants in the workshop joined enthusiastically in their conversation.

Secker began by considering some of the ways that the term "women's experience" is used in theological discourse, particularly as identified in her research among Christian ethicists. She began with two commonly held assumptions: that women can discover at some deep level of our being features of womanness which transcend our differences; and that this knowledge can then be placed in dialogue with men's experience to comprise a truly universal notion of the meaning of human experience. She found herself challenged by Rodriguez who argued that the term "women's experience" masks differences among women.

Rather than assuming a common starting point described as "women's experience" Rodriguez emphasized the profound differences between Secker as a white theologian and herself as a Latina theologian. As Catholic women committed to building new relationships in the world by "justice-seeking actions" (Hunt, 1992), they recognized one commonality in their starting point, but they also discovered significant points of divergence and underlying fears. Whereas Secker used "women's experience" in order to generalize, Rodriguez focused on questions of culture, race and class which led her to see the inherent differences among women. She heard in Secker's quest for universality the danger of trivialization of her people and of herself. Secker worried that insistence upon distinctiveness of race, culture and class could fragment women's collective contribution.

As a result of Secker's dialogue with Rodriguez the second section of her paper was a rethinking of the term "women's experience" beginning with difference rather than searching for commonality. Through dialogue with women of color, she began to understand that a theory of women's experience can only be the product of an interactive quest for understanding which does not set up white women as the norm. Even to say that someone is different is to imply that there is a criterion of sameness from which the other deviates. The dominant group (for instance male or white feminist) becomes the standard against which

others get defined. Such an approach assumes the power to name the other person or group as different and is itself a presumption of power. Secker concluded that a method which does not gloss over the insights of race, culture and class in its quest for shared meanings requires a dialogical approach to doing theology, but a dialogue which places the burden of recognition on white women. White women must learn to really listen to the voices of women whose experience only these women can name. In Secker's words, "We will never understand the depth of that difference until we discover ways to allow other women to give us new ears and new eyes."

Rodriguez shared her struggles to name herself and her community and in so doing provided new ears and new eyes with which to reflect on "women's experience" as a source for feminist thought. She pointed out that the word "Hispanic" is a Eurocentric term developed by bureaucrats for political expediency and is not a self-defining word. She preferred "Latina" because it speaks of ethnicity. "Deep in my heart, I believe that being a Latina has nothing to do with what country one lives in. Rather, it is a state of soul, not one of mind, not one of citizenship." Rodriguez also used "Chicana" to refer to her political consciousness of a people aware that they were born and raised in the United States. But in naming herself she chose Latina.

Latina women are a heterogenous group from a variety of races, religions, political and cultural experiences. The identification of acculturation factors is crucial in describing their experience. They may be first, second, or third generation Latina women, urban or rural dwellers. Given the diversity of their experience Rodriguez referred to elements which may, or may not bind Latina women together. These include the desire and the belief in the right to maintain "our language, customs, ways of perceiving the world and acting in that world." It is a right which has been denied by the dominant culture. Rodriguez observed that Secker used "I" in speaking while she herself instinctively used "we." The Latina speaks a communal language.

Rodriguez pointed out that although Spanish has a word for experience it is not used in the same way as the word experience is used in English. *La realidad*, one's reality, is a better term for describing one's experience in Spanish. Rodriguez movingly described *la realidad* of a Latina woman, a "complex relationality" which evokes such notions as "conquest and resistance, borderlands, [being] born and/or raised in the U.S., and also integrity, anger, pain, economic and political marginalization, and other multiple identities." She drew special attention to the multiple identities of Latina women which often are contradictory and which require crossing from one culture to another. Rodriguez insisted on the need for Latina women to take the time to study their own culture in all its complexity. Latina theology is a communal task which is feminist, cultural, and liberationist.

Through the experience of working together the presenters concluded that a common goal or commitment provides a better starting point for feminist theo-

logy than "women's experience" which too easily overlooks or subsumes differences. Feminist thought must build into its method a way in which the insights of diverse racial and cultural experience may be truly heard.

The vigorous discussion which followed the presentations focused not only on their content but on the collaborative process of doing theology which characterized the work presented. Listening, reverence for the other, and mutual trust require a stance of contemplation which is transformative. Friendship becomes the locus for reflection. Within such a context it is possible for different voices to speak and to be heard.

This workshop helped to clarify how experience can be used as a resource for feminist thought by pointing to the danger of overlooking difference in the search for commonality. It insisted that women must name their own experience with their own voices rather than have it named by others. This has implications for theological method. If women are to give content to the wisdom which diverse racial and cultural groups provide about the meaning of their experience as women, doing theology cannot be the work of isolated scholars. It requires a collaborative and dialectical model. Rodriguez and Secker provided an example of how this might be done. The participants in the workshop embraced their model with enthusiasm and a desire to continue the dialogue.

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