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

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. For example, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, professor of history and director of women's studies at Emory University, has just published *Feminism without Illusion*, 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." 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.

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3Ibid., 9, 83.
How will this happen? It has already begun in the feminist theological project that can be schematized in six logical steps or tasks 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. Second, a theologian shows that the sources are characterized by much hostility, diminishment, frivolity, or romantic mystification. Rosemary Ruether's *Religion and Sexism* 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. 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. 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?" 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

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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).


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.
These proficients are still very lowly . . . because the gold of the spirit is not pu-
rified 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 af-
fections in . . . anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it pre-
viously 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 ex-
perience 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, cre-
ative love in this darkness somehow be redemptive for the world.18

JOANN WOLSKI CONN
Neumann College

of the Cross, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington DC: ICS Pub-


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