

Feminist Theology as Theology of Religions

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Not too long ago, I sat in a gathering of feminist theologians. The topic was 'diversity'; numerous complaints about lack of diversity were being voiced, but it was clear that lack of diversity *among* the Christians, not absence of *religious* diversity, was being protested. I pointed out that the diversity among *Christians* represented was far greater than the diversity among *religions*, and that the discussion presumed a Christian context which I, a non-Christian, found problematic. The conversation paused momentarily to allow me to make my comment, then returned to its previous direction, as if I had never spoken. I felt as if I had momentarily surfaced from underwater in some giant ocean, only to have the waters submerge me again immediately. I also noted that I had felt this way before. In earlier days, it had not been uncommon for men to treat women's observations about religious studies or theology in the same way. One of the few other non-Christian feminists locked eyes with me and whispered, 'They just don't get it, do they?' How many times had we said this about men when trying to explain to them what feminism is and why it matters? This was a profoundly discouraging moment for me, a non-Christian pioneer in the feminist study of religion who has spent my life and career as a feminist theologian and scholar of religions involved almost equally in feminist issues and in issues surrounding religious diversity.

Others have also noticed this strange development in feminist theology. As the editors of the recently published anthology *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* comment:

Although we have included diversity in terms of theoretical and methodological issues, what this volume lacks...is any dialogue with non-Western contexts. This on-going lack of engagement by feminist theology, and gender theory itself, with experience outside Western culture artificially limits the issues of gender and religion. From our

perspective, this is the major task for the next millennium. The traditional dichotomy between East and West, a meta-narrative of a past age, needs to be dissolved to allow the vast plurality of global experiences to take center stage.¹

Ursula King has called feminism 'the missing dimension in the dialogue of religions', noting that if more women became prominent and visible in 'dialogue, this in turn might help to transform the oppressive patriarchal structures of religions'. In the same paper, she notes that Christian 'feminist theology, though wide-ranging and internally very diverse itself, is not yet critically wrestling with the challenge of religious pluralism'.²

'Theology of religions' is a relatively new term that has to do with noting the diversity among the religions of the world and developing conceptual tools for relating with and understanding that diversity. Critical to an adequate theology of religions is that it be knowledgeable about and conversant with the great Asian wisdom traditions; merely raising one's gaze to include other monotheisms does not really constitute serious encounter with religious diversity. To date, theology of religions has been largely a Christian activity,³ but only because religious diversity is more theologically challenging to monotheisms than to non-monotheistic religions. In a religiously diverse world in which people of the various religions are in constant contact with each other, eventually all religions will have to develop ways of helping their believers understand and live peacefully with the religious diversity that is not going to disappear. In this enterprise of developing theologies of religions, many tools can be and have already been used, including comparative studies, inter-religious exchange, and dialogue. As demonstrations of how these various tools can be used and to participate in the adventure of coming to terms with religious diversity in Christian perspective, two books, written by women but containing no explicitly feminist dimensions, are highly recommended: Diane Eck's *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993) and Judith Berling's

1. Deborah F. Sawyer and Diane M. Cutler (eds.), *Is There a Future for Feminist Theology?* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 24.

2. Ursula King, 'Feminism: The Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions', in John May (ed.), *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions* (London: Cassell, 1998), pp. 40-55.

3. For a survey of Christian theologies of religion, see Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

A Pilgrim in Chinese Culture: Negotiating Religious Diversity (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

Discussing feminist theology as theology of religions, clearly presents problems, as the above experiences and quotations indicate. Three intertwined issues are involved: the current lack of religious diversity in most feminist theological forums, the lack of any theology of *religious* diversity in most feminist theology, and the relative lack of feminist participation in most formats for inter-religious exchange. Indeed, the most extensive 'inter-religious' discussion in the literature of feminist theology to date is the relatively acrimonious debate on 'Christian feminist anti-Judaism', which hardly constitutes a theology of religions or an inter-religious exchange by the above criteria.⁴ A few early books are more inclusive, but studying their tales of contents quickly shows that the vast majority of the articles speak from a Christian context, a few from a Jewish context and even fewer from Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or other religious contexts.⁵ Thus, the tasks of this paper must be largely constructive: discussing how or why the current situation regarding feminist theology and issues of religious diversity came to be, developing feminist grounds for serious feminist attention to religious diversity, and finally, suggesting how a feminist theology of religions might look. In this brief paper, only an outline of those tasks can be undertaken.

Feminist theology, as I envision it, is a movement that cuts across tradition lines, influences all religious traditions, and is relevant to all of them. Indeed, in the early years of the feminist theological movement, that was the case, as Christian, Jewish, post-Christian, and Buddhist theologians worked closely together and were about equally visible in the feminist theological movement. Nevertheless, struggle over diversity is not new to the feminist theological movement. 'In retrospect, it is clear that diversity—of aims, concerns, and perspectives—was always present even when feminist gatherings felt unified, exuberant, and triumphant in their stand against patriarchal religion and

4. Katherina von Kellenback, *Anti-Judaism in Feminist Religious Writings* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994); Leonore Siegle-Wenschwitz, Judith Plaskow, Marie-Theres Wacker, Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes and Aspodeld P. Long, 'Special Section on Feminist Anti-Judaism', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7.2 (Fall, 1991), pp. 95-125.

5. Diana Eck and Devaki Jain (eds.), *Speaking of Faith: Global Perspectives on Women, Religion, and Social Change* (Philadelphia: New Society Press, 1987); Virginia Ramey Mollenkott (ed.), *Women of Faith in Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

androcentric scholarship.⁶ By the mid-1980s, cries of outrage about the watchword of early feminist theology, 'women's experience', were widespread. The feminist theological movement had universalized 'women's experience' as white, middle-class, heterosexual experience, it was claimed. Therefore, to be genuinely inclusive, diversity of class, race, culture, and sexual orientation must be taken seriously. Genuine and irreconcilable theological differences also emerged. Experiencing this breakdown of a perceived unified front against patriarchy was traumatic and painful. Why was/is it so difficult to deal with this diversity and disagreement? My own suggested answer is that the difficulty is, in large part, due to 'a deeply entrenched tendency in Western thinking to turn difference into hierarchy... If we are different, then one of us must be better'.⁷

Because of deliberate efforts to be more genuinely inclusive and because excluded groups of women demanded that their voices be heard, many feminist theological gatherings now are more diverse regarding race, class, culture and sexual orientation. But, somehow, in that process, *religious* diversity was lost. For all their faults, the feminist theological gatherings of the early 1970s *were* more religiously diverse than is common today. It is also worth noting that in most contemporary cultural discourse about diversity, religion is rarely mentioned...

I would argue that, in ignoring religious diversity, feminist theology has stopped short of its goal of genuine inclusivity, even lost ground. Though diversity is usually valued by feminist theologians, the kind of diversity promoted is inter-cultural diversity *within* Christianity.⁸ 'Feminist theology' and 'Christian feminist theology' have been conflated in many arenas of discussion. Unwittingly, Christian feminist theologians, who think of themselves as more inclusive than mainstream theologians, have been co-opted by one of the more archaic, out-of-touch aspects of mainstream theology—its tendency to equate 'religion' with 'Christianity'. Furthermore, as one who works extensively in both feminist theology and in the theology of religions, in my experience, Christian feminist theologians are among the worst offenders in this regard. For non-Christian feminists, this exclusionary practice is insulting, maddening and frustrating. The place I would

6. Rita M. Gross, *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), p. 49.

7. Gross, *Feminism and Religion*, p. 51.

8. For a more detailed discussion of this process, see Gross, *Feminism and Religion*, pp. 49-58.

least expect to encounter it is in the feminist theological movement to which I have given so much of my life and work. Personal feelings and experience aside, this development is also limiting for the development of feminist theology. Inter-cultural Christian diversity will not yield the stunning variety of religious options that would come with genuine *inter-religious* study and dialogue that also took account of the variety *within* each religion.

Are there feminist grounds for developing theologies of religion and for learning about and thinking about religious diversity? The history of the feminist theological movement itself provides the first major *feminist* reason for being concerned with *religious* diversity. Feminist theology was born from the experience of being excluded by patriarchal religions and the resulting convictions that the voices of the excluded deserve to be heard and that adequate theology cannot be done on the basis of erasing many voices and limiting the theological voice to the chosen few. The landmark anthology of feminist theology, *Womanspirit Rising*, proclaimed in 1979 that 'the *diversity* [emphasis added] within feminist theology and spirituality is its strength'.⁹ The second major *feminist* reason for such concern was also articulated already in that early anthology. Though the phrase 'widening the canon' does not appear in that anthology, the concept is implicit throughout it, especially in its concerns with rejecting the binding authority of the past and in searching for new traditions. Since then, the issues of how to use the received canon in feminist ways and where to find new sources with which to do feminist theology have been important to most feminist theologians. For feminists, concern with religious diversity is necessitated by the most basic values of feminist theology—the importance of inclusivity and the necessity to widen the canon.

These feminist reasons for interest in religious diversity mesh with, are different ways of expressing, two reasons why a theology of religions is necessary today. One is ethical and the other is epistemological. The ethical reasons have to do with the facts that religious diversity is a reality, not a mistake, and that religious diversity is part of the experience of most contemporary people. Intolerance and exclusive truth claims may be unavoidable when religions are relatively isolated from each other, but they are lethal when religions must mix and mingle in a common environment, as is the case today. The moral reasons thus amount to the same thing as the feminist value of

9. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 15.

including the formerly excluded. The epistemological reasons have to do with the illuminating power of the 'comparative mirror',¹⁰ with the truth of the slogan that 'to know one religion is to know none'. They also have to do with the fact that religions other than one's own may well contain ideas and symbols from which feminist theologians might learn something useful. The epistemological reasons thus amount to the same thing as the feminist need to widen the canon, whether through rejecting received patriarchal interpretations or through utilizing formerly non-canonical sources.

In keeping with my understanding of feminism as a religious movement that crosses religious boundaries and has similar implications for all religions, I will propose a theology of religions that I believe would be an adequate feminist theology of religions. Though to date, theology of religions has been largely composed by Christian theologians, I do not believe that an adequate theology of religions would differ significantly from one tradition to another. Theologians of all traditions have to deal with the fact of religious diversity in a morally compassionate and theologically compelling manner; they all need to ask what can be learned from diverse perspectives. Insofar as possible, I will pose the conceptual alternatives and provide arguments for the positions I advocate. In such a short article, of course, it will not be possible to discuss fully all possible alternatives and arguments; thus it is an invitation to discussion, not a foreclosure of it.

*Moral Issues and Feminist Values: Evaluating Religious Diversity
Positively and Including Those who have been Excluded*

The first layer of a theology of religions is concerned with the problem of how to understand normatively the fact that other religions besides one's own exist. To date, three positions have been proposed: exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist. Because these positions are already well-known and developed in mainstream theology of religions, they will only be summarized very briefly here.¹¹

The exclusivist claims that her position alone among the world's religions has validity and would be the only religion in an ideal world. This position necessitates negative attitudes toward all other religions and exclusivists often claim nothing of any value can be found in other religions. The inclusivists say that there is some merit in other reli-

10. William Paden, *Religious Worlds: The Comparative Study of Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 164.

11. A clear, accessible discussion is found in D. Eck, *Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Benares* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), pp. 166-99.

gions, that they are not wholly inadequate. But an inclusivist would also claim that, in the final analysis, these other religions are not completely adequate because they are waiting to be 'fulfilled' by the teachings found in the inclusivists' religion. The other religions would be 'better' religions if only they would adopt what the inclusivist most values about her own religion. (This use of the term 'inclusivity' is not the same as that discussed as the feminist value of inclusivity. I use the term here because it is usual in mainstream theologies of religion.) The pluralist would say that no religion is either the only valid religion or the most valid among religions. Rather, each religion provides something valuable and interesting in a giant mosaic. We probably have personal affinities for one among the religions, but that does not elevate the worth of that religion for everyone else. A pluralist is also interested in dialogue with members of other religions and in learning from other religions, whether through the study of that religion or through dialogue.

For a feminist theology of religions, the only suitable candidate among these options is the pluralist position. It is inconceivable that a feminist theologian would go through all the heartache of being excluded from her own religion and doing the theological work required to include herself back in, only to turn around and make exclusive or inclusive truth claims about the religion that excluded her! Furthermore, as already pointed out, a major value of feminist theology is to include the voices that have not been heard, to widen the circle, to learn how to welcome diversity. It makes no sense for those values to stop when they hit the boundary of one's own religion and for another set of values to take over at that point. I do not think this would be a controversial point among feminist theologians, even though none has, to my knowledge, explicitly addressed the issue. Because this argument, in my view, holds for feminist theology, it follows that it also holds for 'mainstream' theology.¹²

Other ethical reasons for preferring the pluralist position are not specifically feminist. Only the pluralist position provides ways for different religions to live together peacefully, without competition. The exclusivist or inclusivist positions, if held simultaneously by members of different religions, can only lead to mutual hostility. It is unreasonable to take for oneself a position regarding religious diversity that, if taken by others of a different persuasion, leads to suffering and

12. For a detailed presentation of my discussion of these arguments, see Gross, 'Religious Diversity: Some Implications for Monotheism', *Crosscurrents* 49.3 (Fall 1999), pp. 349-66.

away from peace, wholeness and healing. If religions don't provide peace, wholeness and healing, what good are they?

When the pluralist position is advocated, someone always brings up the spectre of absolute relativism. Does anything go then? Are there no standards, theological or moral? Pluralists are not saying that one cannot evaluate religious phenomena; we are saying that no religion has a monopoly on either truth or falsity, relevant or harmful teachings and practices. Furthermore, every religion has some of each. In evaluating religious phenomena, I would claim that ethical behaviour is far more important than theological doctrines. It is easy to demonstrate, if one studies world religions, that there are many cogent theologies; there is no particular need to rank or evaluate them against one another. If they can be evaluated or ranked at all, the only possible basis for such ranking would be the ethical *consequences* of theological ideas. When a theological doctrine, by itself, harms people who try to believe in it or when a theological doctrine translates directly into oppressive social practices, then it could be negatively evaluated. Many Jewish and Christian feminists have claimed that the exclusively male language and imagery of deity common in the monotheistic religions is one such example.¹³ More generally, I would claim that if people who hold to a set of doctrines are transformed in ethically positive ways by their adherence of those doctrines, they can be evaluated positively, though that does not mean those doctrines are therefore of universal value. If, on the other hand, people are rigid, inflexible, hateful towards those who are different, wasteful of natural resources, or cruel to animals, then the religious doctrines they hold are not working, are not doing their proper job of transforming humans into gentler, kinder, more compassionate beings. According to this standard, all religions have both succeeded and failed, another reason to hold the pluralist position.¹⁴

Epistemological Issues and Feminist Values: The Importance of Thinking about Diverse Religions and the Feminist Need to Widen the Canon

The ethical dimensions of a feminist theology of religions are quite straightforward and uncontroversial, in my view. The more interest-

13. For example, see Carol Christ's famous essay 'Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections', in Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*, pp. 273-87.

14. For a fuller development of these arguments, see Gross, 'The Virtues and Joys of the Comparative Mirror', *Boston University School of Theology Focus* (Fall 1999), pp. 9-16.

ing, and potentially more challenging dimension of any theology of religions is the epistemological dimension, which takes us from accepting a plurality of religions as theologically unproblematic to the necessity of actually learning something about, and possibly from, these religions. The epistemological reasons for developing a feminist theology of religions centre on the effect it could have on one's *own* theological development, and thus the development of feminist theology in one's *own* tradition. There are two possible and interdependent ways of going about this task: learning about and from the various religions through academic study of them and engaging in dialogue with members of these traditions.

Can one claim to do adequate constructive theology, feminist or otherwise, if one knows little or nothing about religions other than one's own? At least at a time such as ours, in which religious diversity is everywhere and information about world religions is readily available, I would claim that one cannot. The theological imperative has always included taking account of the contemporary culture, which now includes what the modern disciplines and modern knowledge tell us about the world. Included in that knowledge is detailed information about the phenomenon of religion in general, as well as information about a great variety of religions. In a pluralistic and post-colonial era, it is inappropriate to proceed with one's constructive work as if that revolution regarding our knowledge about world religions had not occurred. If theologians are not at least somewhat familiar with this material, they are not operating with a full deck and are constructing theology in a vacuum. How could a theologian, feminist or otherwise, make any claims about religion when she is operating with a sample of one?

I would also make this claim because of the power of the 'comparative mirror' to illumine self as well as other. It is hard to imagine looking at religion through the lens of only one religion after one has begun to study and think about religion comparatively, not only because of what has been learned about the possibility of other religious perspectives, but also because one has so many more tools with which to see one's own religion. The phrase 'comparative mirror' denotes, not only learning some information, but using that information in a certain way. A mirror is reflexive, whereas information by itself, is not. In the comparative mirror, we see ourselves in the context and perspective of many other religious phenomena, inviting even necessitating self-reflection about our own religious and cultural systems. In that process, 'Our own world, instead of being taken for granted, becomes exposed as *a* world, its contents held up to the comparative

mirror and we become a phenomenon to ourselves'.¹⁵ For theological reflection, feminist or otherwise, nothing is so useful as becoming a phenomenon to oneself because in that process, we see and understand ourselves much more clearly. Part of that seeing includes seeing the strengths and weaknesses of the perspectives we take for granted. As we begin to experience that there really are religious *alternatives*, our own perspective must also become an *alternative*, not merely the only viable theological position or something with which we are stuck.

Furthermore, by really looking into the comparative mirror, we will undoubtedly find many alternatives that we would be unlikely to imagine on our own. For example, most feminist theology takes it for granted that we will speak of deity in some way, even if we are very dissatisfied with the symbolism of deity named and spoken of as male-only. But what of a non-theistic religious alternative, such as that modelled by Buddhism? It would be useful to feminist theologians used to working in theistic contexts to contemplate such a possibility, to contemplate the pros and cons of theism itself. Theism looks different in the comparative mirror than it does when one takes it for granted and does not regard it as an *alternative*.

Unlike a beginning student of religion, an experienced constructive theologian will probably begin, not only to learn *about* but to learn *from* the material revealed in the comparative mirror relatively quickly. This process of learning *from* the data in the comparative mirror needs to be discussed carefully because it contains many potential pitfalls. It must also be admitted that a *feminist* theologian will face challenges when looking into the comparative mirror that may not be faced by a conventional theologian.

Feminists sometimes object to looking into the comparative mirror because all the religions they see there are patriarchal to some degree, and people are tired of studying patriarchal religion. In and of itself, this complaint is true; all major world religions are patriarchal to some extent. However, there is little place else to go for alternatives with which to imagine religion anew. It would be enjoyable to find some religion that fulfilled one's feminist dreams, but that is unlikely. Such religious visions have to be pieced together from the available parts, combined with imagination, stubbornness and courage. Why limit oneself to the familiar patriarchies in that quest? There are very interesting and very useful religious ideas and practices in other traditions. Furthermore, feminist theologians, especially Christian and Jewish feminist theologians, are more than adept at finding inspira-

15. Paden, *Religious Worlds*, p. 165.

tion and reason for going on, despite and within familiar patriarchies. Why should it be different with unfamiliar patriarchal religions? The benefits of finding a really useful and interesting symbol, concept or practice are greater than the discomfort generated by encountering patriarchy in unfamiliar places.

Nevertheless, for a feminist, one of the trickiest tasks of looking into the comparative mirror is dealing with material that is not only patriarchal in familiar ways but also seemingly immoral and irredeemably oppressive. Western feminists, religious and secular, have sometimes been eager to criticize and condemn practices that strike them as completely cruel and unbearable for women. Unquestionably, when a feminist studies some unfamiliar religious contexts, she is likely to heave a sigh of relief that *she* does not live in that culture. Some practices, such as African genital operations on women, cannot be evaluated as anything but completely horrific by feminist standards. Nevertheless, we must ask if vocal outrage is the most effective way of responding to such practices.

Quick condemnation of unfamiliar religious or cultural beliefs and practices is one of the great pitfalls of cross-cultural studies in general. The purpose and the promise of such study is not to feel smug and superior. Long experience in teaching unfamiliar religions has given me certain insights about how best to proceed. First, the ground rules of looking into and learning from the comparative mirror *require* suspension of judgment at first, until one is thoroughly familiar with the situation being studied. One *must* first try to understand why such practices exist and *what* purposes they serve, according to the viewpoint of the religion being studied. Empathy is the most critical tool for looking into the comparative mirror in ways that do not create further mutual entrenchment and scorn. It must be applied in all cases, even the most unsavoury, *before* appropriate judgments can be made.

If one does not jump to conclusions about how certain religious or cultural phenomena are experienced by projecting from one's experience, but takes more time to reflect on the practice, there may be some surprising conclusions. Some practices that seem undesirable turn out not to be as completely disadvantageous to women as they might seem at first. For example, arranged marriages *can* protect women from the need for self-display, the indignities of the singles bar and the danger of date rape. Polygyny *can* provide female companionship and help with childcare. Furthermore, every woman who wants to marry can be married in a polygynous culture. Dress codes that require modesty *can* free women from needing to display themselves

as sex objects competing to attract the male gaze if women are to find partners.

In other cases, seemingly undesirable conditions are not really very different from what Western women experienced until very recently, or even today. In particular, statements about the inferiority of women and the requirement that women should be subservient to male authority stemming from other religious contexts should not sound too different from the home-grown variety.

Finally, outsiders' judgments about women's situations are often made on the basis of *public* observation, of what goes on in public spaces. Women do not usually have authority in public spaces, including religious public spaces; indeed they may not even be present. However, if one knows the situation more intimately, one will discover that women often have a great deal of power behind the scenes, and everyone knows that and takes it for granted. As we have become familiar with the cultural and religious systems of India and China, this point has been demonstrated time and again.

However, some religious ideas and practices remain deplorable to a feminist even after much consideration. Then what? Cross-cultural public denunciations from first world countries and former colonists probably only entrench the situation further. Then resisting changes in women's situation becomes part of national pride and resistance to Westernization. It does little good to talk about African genital *muti* rather than African genital operations, or to decry Muslim practices surrounding gender, to name two of the most inflammatory feminist causes. It would probably be far better to work quietly with *women* from those situations and to support them financially and emotionally.

Though it may seem that we have strayed from a feminist theology of religions into the ethics of cross-cultural study, that is not the case. Theologians are perhaps more apt to make judgments about what they study than are social scientists and scholars of religious studies. Therefore, as theologians become more competent in their knowledge about the vast diversity of religious phenomena and in their theological thinking about religious diversity itself, it is crucial for them to be able to make comparisons and judgments in ways that are not offensive or naive.

Feminists also sometimes object to looking into the comparative mirror because of the difficulty entailed in becoming somewhat competent in understanding accurately what the comparative mirror is showing. In my experience, this has occurred at all levels of scholarly development, from professional scholars who do not attend papers on

feminist topics if they are about an unfamiliar religion, to students in a Goddess seminar who tuned out when we came to the book on Hindu goddesses. When I asked my students, who were all women studies minors and eager to study material on goddesses, why they were not so willing to make the effort to learn about the Hindu materials, I got the same answer from them that I receive from more established scholars. 'Too many foreign words,' they said. The apprenticeship required for being able to use the comparative mirror effectively and adequately can be daunting. One *is* required to learn a good bit of terminology (perhaps even a foreign language) and one must emphathize one's way into rather different worldviews.

On the one hand, an extremely sensitive issue regarding cross-cultural knowledge and exchange is inappropriate appropriation without an adequate apprenticeship. Segments of the feminist spirituality movement have been especially criticized by native Americans for indiscriminate and unauthorized borrowing from their traditions.¹⁶ Caution is better than plunging ahead on the basis of insufficient knowledge. On the other hand, though the process of learning about other traditions is never-ending in a certain sense, it is essentially no different from the process by which theologians first learn the ancient texts and languages, and all the theological variants required for competence and theological literacy within their indigenous tradition. Theologians are not born with that information already imprinted in their brains; they learn it, usually relatively early in their training. But why stop there? My claim is twofold. First, to do adequate theology in a pluralistic world, one needs information about the whole world, not just one's corner in it. Second, the additional perspective on one's own tradition that one gains by this process of looking into the comparative mirror is well worth the effort.

I have already offered the example of studying and contemplating a non-theistic religion like Buddhism to refine one's understanding of the utility and limits of theistic symbolism. Hinduism offers the example of well-nuanced ways of alternating personal and impersonal imagery of the Ultimate, which is an issue with which many feminist theologians are concerned. At least as provocative are the many goddesses of Asia, with their colourful symbolism and intricate mythologies. They provide a living example of goddesses as integral parts of ordinary peoples' religious lives, not merely as the construct of a small number of Western religious thinkers. I can think of no reason

16. Cynthia Eller, *Living in the Lap of the Goddess: The Feminist Spirituality Movement in America* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp. 74-81.

to exclude these materials from the widened canon, to stop short at the borders of Western history and culture.

When feminist theologians do let a wider canon speak to them, there are two ways it can influence their theology. One is by osmosis and the other is by deliberately altering one's theology on the basis of what has been learned from the comparative mirror. By 'osmosis' I mean that study and contemplation of various unfamiliar ideas, symbols and practices gradually begin to affect how one thinks and how one views the world, which, of course, spills over into one's theologizing. A good example of the process would be the post-Christian theology of Carol Christ, who has studied ancient goddesses, especially those of Greece, very thoroughly, but who does not simply import wholesale the goddesses she has studied into her theology. Rather, she constructs a systematic theology of the goddess based on this study and a good bit of creative imagination.¹⁷ In certain ways this process is more authentic and involves less chance of total misunderstanding and misrepresentation of unfamiliar materials.

The process of direct borrowing and deliberately altering one's theology is more difficult, which is probably one reason why most academically trained theologians avoid it. If academically trained theologians do deliberately alter their theology on the basis of what they see in the comparative mirror, they are more likely to look at marginalized materials from their own tradition than to look at symbols or practices from completely different traditions. A good example of a feminist theologian who engages in this kind of use of the comparative mirror is Rosemary Ruether, especially her books *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) and *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998). These books demonstrate clearly how material that was omitted from the official canon of Christianity can be used in constructing deliberately alternative theologies.

Making theological use of materials from outside one's own culture or religion is much more difficult and challenging because it is so easy to use them in inappropriate or superficial ways. Sometimes those whose symbols and practices we might like to learn from do not wish to share them. Native American resentment about the ways in which the New Age and feminist spirituality movements 'borrow' their symbols and practices has already been noted. A wise rule of thumb in such cases might be to look elsewhere if we are told that we are not

17. Carol Christ, *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

welcome to these symbols and practices, no matter how attractive they might be to us. In other cases, the materials are so wrenched out of context and re-interpreted that the new theology lacks credibility. Or, as people shop here and there for goddesses and religious practices they like, the result is a 'good parts' synthesis that is superficial.

Most problematic, however, is simply not doing justice to the materials one is borrowing. For example, as a long-time practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism, I am not thrilled by most appropriations of 'Tantric goddesses' because they miss the whole point of the practice and the symbolism. My own theology is, of course, deeply influenced by these materials, but I have studied them closely for twenty-five years. Thus we find ourselves back to the question of what constitutes a proper apprenticeship. Time and again, I have found this question of apprenticeship to be crucial; religious teachers of many backgrounds, including native American, are happy to teach committed students willing to serve the apprenticeship.

On the other hand, clearly religious symbols can cross cultural frontiers, change, develop, and become deeply incorporated into new religious contexts. We know this because it has happened. The goddesses of the ancient world became the Virgin Mary. Kwan-yin broke loose from her Buddhist moorings and her former male gender as an Indian bodhisattva to become one of the most popular and beloved goddesses of China and Japan. There is no reason that, over time, this process could not happen to Western religions, both Christian and post-Christian, as Asian goddesses become more familiar and more beloved. At this point in time, the most likely candidate for finding a home in the West is the Hindu Goddess Kali,¹⁸ though Kwan-yin is also receiving more attention from Westerners longing for goddesses.¹⁹ The meanings of Kali and Kwan-yin and their impact on devotees are quite different in Western appreciations and appropriations of Kali or Kwan-Yin from what they are in Asian contexts. However, with enough time and with widespread veneration of these goddesses, that will not matter. They will have transformed into Western goddesses with Asian roots, who will still be worshipped in Asian contexts as well. This process will be especially interesting because

18. Rachel Fell McDermott, 'The Western Kali', in John Stratton Hawley and Diana Marie Wulff (eds.), *Devi: Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 281-313.

19. Sandy Boucher, *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).

Asian devotees of Kali or Kwan-yin and their European and American devotees can interact easily, if they choose to do so.

Even though feminist theologians do not often engage in the *study* of other religions, this possibility has been discussed at some length because of its potential impact on the development of feminist theology. However, at present, most of the few feminist theologians involved in learning about and learning from other religions do so through the practice of inter-religious dialogue, of which Buddhist-Christian dialogue is probably the most developed. In some ways, dialogue is probably an easier and quicker method by which to learn about and learn from unfamiliar religions than study. In dialogue, one is interacting with members of another religious tradition who are usually very well educated and very articulate in that tradition. They serve as a living library ready to correct one's misinterpretations and misunderstandings of the other religion. However, dialogue between relative amateurs without thorough academic grounding in their own tradition could well become a detour.

To those unpractised in dialogue, it is important to understand what genuine dialogue is *not*. It is not a covert missionary activity in which each side tries to prove the superiority of their religion. It is not a debate, with all the adversarial connotations of the term 'debate'. Nor is it an attempt to find some commonality between religions, an attempt to discover that at the bottom line in an esoteric way, all religions really are the same.

Many people have the misconception that, in conversations or dialogue with people of other religious persuasions, one could not help but try to demonstrate the superiority of one's own position to one's partner. After all, they say, 'You are committed to this religious perspective; you have devoted years to studying and practising it. Clearly you must think that it is the best position.' The question in response is 'Best for whom?' A pluralistic theology of religions easily accommodates love of and enthusiasm for one's own religious position with deep appreciation of other positions. One does not have to be very psychologically sophisticated to realize that religion cannot be a 'one size fits all' phenomenon. There is no reason to expect that the religious symbols and practices to which I can deeply relate have the same resonance for everyone. Being defensive about one's own perspective is the least likely stance for successful dialogue. For this reason, participation in dialogue almost requires a pluralistic theology of religions, or at least a broadly inclusivist theology of religions. One of the major problems in inter-religious dialogue is that the people who need it most are the least likely to engage in dialogue.

Debate is also less than ideal as a format for dialogue, and, in fact, it is never used as a format for dialogue, to my knowledge, even though some might think dialogue would be debate. Debate is an exercise in which the most skilled debaters 'win', which does not prove the truth of their position, and the agenda of debate is to score points for oneself, not to understand the other. Furthermore, a skilled debater needs to be able to argue either side of the debate, which makes debate better suited for fine-tuning one's understanding of the intricacies of various theological positions within one's own tradition than for understanding a radically different alternative. Unless both debaters were highly skilled in discussing both religions, debate as a format for inter-religious dialogue simply would not work. Even then, it would not prove to be as fruitful as conversation on a common topic.

Probably the most widespread misconception about inter-religious dialogue is that its purpose is to find common ground, areas of agreement between the religions, so that mutual suspicions and hostilities can end. After all, if all religions really teach the same things in the long run, what is there to fight about? This understanding of dialogue carries a covert theology of religions with it. Genuine religious diversity is still seen as a problem if this is one's concept of the purpose of dialogue. It is felt that there must be some common meeting point for all the religions, if we could only find it, and that finding it would promote better relations between the religions. But why do we need a common meeting point? Can't we just appreciate the diversity of religions? Most people who have specialized to some extent in inter-religious dialogue do not hold the view that there is a common ground upon which all the religions can agree, nor do they think that it would be preferable for there to be a common ground for all religions.

Why, then, should one engage in inter-religious dialogue? In the long run, the purpose of dialogue is the same as the purpose of studying other traditions: to enrich one's own theology with input that one would probably never think of by oneself. The foremost theoretician of dialogue, John Cobb, states that the attitude one brings to dialogue is willingness to listen completely and carefully, and to change as a result of dialogue. He, and many others, would claim that any genuine encounter changes one; therefore, entering inter-religious dialogue means being open to theological growth. Nor are the changes predictable ahead of time. Programmed change and genuine encounter are mutually incompatible.

It is important to realize that while theological growth and change is an assumed outcome of dialogue, the change with which one is concerned is internal change in oneself, *not* affecting the theological

thinking of the *other*. That is their prerogative and their issue. For example, in discussing Jewish-Christian dialogue, John Cobb suggests that, while Christians might hope that some day Jews could integrate the story of Jesus into their history and would feel that such a change would enrich Judaism considerably, the reason for Christians to engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue is *not* to make *that* case. 'The Christian purpose in dialogue with Jews must be to change Christianity.'²⁰

This principle does not mean that dialoguers cannot make suggestions to each other, especially when trust has developed. Dialogue can also provide a way to see ourselves as others see us, if we are open to hearing about the impressions our theologies make on other people. Genuine dialogue produces the reaction, 'I never would have thought of that', regarding assumptions and givens of our own position. But that process is reversible. In genuine dialogue, when mutual trust is established and it is clear that there is no covert missionary agenda, one is free to say to one's dialogue partners, 'You know, I just don't get that belief or that practice. It doesn't make any sense to me. What does it offer you?' One can also make suggestions to one's partners. 'Why don't you consider these ideas or practices? It seems to me that they might be helpful to you.' Finally, of course, one of the genuinely enjoyable aspects of inter-religious dialogue is discussing comparisons and contrasts between religions with truly knowledgeable people of good will.

That feminism is the missing dimension in religious dialogue was one of the jumping-off points of this chapter. But that voice is missing because the feminists aren't there! In the dialogue contexts in which I participate, Christian feminists' seeming lack of interest in dialogue is often noted and regretted. As with studying other religious traditions, probably feminists hesitate to become involved in such dialogues because they involve dialogue among patriarchal religions. But, at least in some dialogue contexts, there is a great deal of sensitivity to feminist issues and the men are as unaccepting of religious sexism as are the women. For example, the Society for Buddhist-Christian Studies wrote into its bylaws the principle that its board and its officers, as well as speakers in its programs, will always include, not only parity between Christians and Buddhists, but also between men and women. That happened in part because feminists participated in the founding of the society. Granted, other dialogue contexts are more sexist and

20. John Cob, *Beyond Dialogue: Towards a Mutual Transformation of Christianity and Buddhism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 49.

less welcoming of women. But the academic study of religion, and Jewish and Christian theology were not very welcoming of feminism either when we first demanded entry. Because feminism is a major movement in many religions today, its voices need to be heard in the dialogues among these religions. But feminists themselves are the only ones who can add that voice. Until feminists insist upon entering inter-religious dialogue, feminism will continue to be the missing voice in inter-religious dialogue.

Summary

Feminist theology's lack of serious attention to any dimension of a theology of religions, to *religious* diversity, is its most serious failing, in my view. This lack of attention is truly difficult to understand, given feminism's emphases on including the unheard voices, on not trying to speak for others, and on the need for new sources for theology. Feminist theologians could benefit greatly from exposure to religious systems that are *truly different*, that are not just culturally diverse variants of Christianity or monotheism. Furthermore, this lack of attention to the theology of religions and to inter-religious dialogue isolates and marginalizes feminist theology in the academy and in the world. If we want to change the world, we can hardly do it by retreating to our feminist enclaves and never seriously encountering the rest of the religious world. Ignoring even our feminist colleagues whose *feminist* theologies may be *religiously* different is even more peculiar. If *feminists* of the various religions are not talking with each other, one wonders what has gone wrong with religious feminism.

The claims and arguments put forth in this paper are all challenging and controversial. But I do not believe they are more challenging and controversial than were the feminist study of religions or Jewish, Christian and post-Christian feminist theologies when they were first proposed. Besides, someone has to go out on a limb when something important has been ignored!