

TRRS4010 – CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM

4. CHRISTIANITY AND WOMEN

During the twentieth century, great advances were made in enabling women to play a full role in social, political and economic life. Prior to the twentieth century, women's roles were restricted to the home and domestic life. For much of history, women have been perceived to be weak and helpless, unable to undertake physical work or fulfill intellectual tasks. While this was considered to be *natural*, over the course of the twentieth century it was effectively demonstrated that it was, in fact, the result of social forces often propped up by religious teaching. As a result, the Christian church, its teaching and the practice of its faith was argued to be both patriarchal and sexist. The feminist movement emerged in order to argue and work for women's emancipation; feminist theology emerged in order to give voice to women's religious and spiritual needs.

Sexism and Patriarchy

Sexism is 'the prejudice or discrimination especially against women on the grounds of sex'. Patriarchy is 'a form of social organization or government in which a man or men rule and descent is reckoned through the male line'. For Janet Martin Soskice 'sexism is not something that hurts women's feelings, sexism kills millions and millions and millions of girls and women each year'¹ and she quotes evidence to show that up to 100 million women and girls die each year because they are denied the same medical care, food and social services as men. 'Where there is anything, boy children and men get it first.'²

The correct response to this situation, feminists have argued, is one of anger. Mary Daly (1928-2010), a pioneering feminist theologian, perhaps best encapsulates this anger in which women 'go mad' and males are identified as demonic with an exclusively female society posited as utopia. Sexism, for Daly, lies at the root of all evil. 'When will they understand?' she writes provocatively. 'It is rapism that has spawned racism. It is gynocide that gives rise to genocide.'³ Daly's rhetoric was intended to assert that at the heart of all violence (rape; genocide) is the basic discrimination between the sexes, where men assert their authority and their status over women (the word 'gynocide' – which Daly coined – comes from the Greek word γυνή [gunē] which means 'woman', thus the word means 'killing of womankind'). Another feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford

¹ Janet Martin Soskice, 'Response to Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel', in Hilary D. Regan and Iain Torrance (eds), *Christ and Context: Confrontation Between Gospel and Culture* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), p. 118.

² Soskice, 'Response to Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel', p.117.

³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1974), p.193; also p.190.

Ruether (b. 1936) believes that women's journey of anger must be undertaken by all women in order to move away from the endemic sexism in western culture.⁴ Daly's radicalism brought her into conflict with the authorities at Boston College (a Jesuit institution) where she taught theology, ethics and women's studies from 1967 to 1999. She refused male students entry into her classes. The college authorities argued that this violated US Federal Law which asserted that no person should be denied an education on the grounds of sex. Rather than teach male students, Daly began absenting herself from classes, leading to her losing tenure and finally 'retiring' from the institution in a settlement agreement in 1999. Daly rejected calls for equality between the sexes. She argued that women should govern men and that the evolutionary process would result in a 'decontamination' of the planet in order for it to survive. This would include a 'drastic reduction' in the population of males.⁵

Rosemary Radford Ruether is not as radical a thinker as Daly. She has maintained her association with the Catholic Church in which she was raised, believing that it can be reformed from within. Nevertheless, she has argued that faith needs to take women's experiences into account and has approached theology from a syncretistic point of view. She believes that insight into the spiritual should be welcomed from all religions and philosophies. She also believes that women need to establish their own forums for spiritual growth and supports a sense of 'female chauvinism' and 'positive discrimination' in order to address the social imbalance created by patriarchy.

The Christian Tradition

Feminists have identified the Christian tradition as being in part responsible for the sexism and patriarchy endemic within western culture. The problems begin with the Bible. The teaching, found in Genesis 2, that Eve succumbed to the serpent's temptation and ate the fruit of the forbidden tree, gave rise to the teaching that women had caused the 'Fall' of humankind from grace, were responsible for bringing death into the creation, and were to be branded as temptresses who needed to be kept under control by men. This lies behind the way in which Tertullian (160-220) addressed women: 'You are the devil's gateway. You are the unsealer of the forbidden tree. You are the first deserter of divine law ... You destroyed so early God's image, man. On account of your desire, that is death, even the Son of God had to die'.⁶ If Jesus died to save humankind

⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk: Toward A Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1983), p. 188.

⁵ Susan Bridle, 'No Man's Land', in *Enlightenment Magazine* (Winter 1999).

⁶ Brian Wren, *What Language Shall I Borrow? God-Talk in Worship: A Male Response to Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1995), p. 24.

from sin, and sin had entered the creation through Eve's disobedience, then Eve (and her daughters, i.e. women) is responsible for Jesus' death on the cross.

Alongside this, the early Church Fathers sought to make distinctions between men and women on theological grounds. Chrysostom (347-407) associated this with the teaching that, unlike other creatures, human beings were created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), but, contrary to the biblical passage, he claimed that this was only true of men: "Then why is the man said to be in the "image of God" and the woman not? Because "image" has rather to do with authority, and this only the man has; the woman has it no longer'.⁷ For Chrysostom, then, woman had lost the image through her disobedience. Thus women could not fulfill any role which involved authority but instead had to submit to the authority of men because their authority is grounded in the image of God which they carry and, for men, remains intact. Such teaching is also found in Ambrosiaster (which is a pseudonym for the author of a set of Latin commentaries attributed to Ambrose of Milan 337-397): 'For how can it be said of woman that she is in the image of God when she is demonstrably subject to male dominion and has no authority? For she can neither teach nor be a witness in a court nor take an oath nor be a judge'.⁸

Much of this is based on particular interpretation of certain biblical verses. For while Paul asserts in Galatians 3:28 that 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus', in fact he upholds social distinctions between the sexes. For example:

But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God (1 Corinthians 11:3).

As in all the congregations of the saints, women should keep silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church' (1 Corinthians 14:33-35).

But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence' (1 Timothy 2:12).

⁷ Janet Martin Soskice, 'Can a Feminist Call God Father?', in Alvin F. Kimel (ed.), *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 85.

⁸ Soskice, 'Can a Feminist Call God Father?', p. 85.

Feminists have argued that readings such as these have led to the exclusion of women from leadership roles in the church and, because the church was responsible for the reconstruction of European society after the collapse of the Roman Empire, they have led to the exclusion of women from social, political and economic life as well.

Some evidence in support of this can be gleaned from the recent debates regarding the consecration of women bishops. While the Anglican churches in the world have now all agreed that women can become bishops, other sacramental churches – such as the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches – stubbornly refuse to countenance the ordination of women priests. Their argument is sacramental and traditional: they believe that the priest is the vicar (from the Latin *vicare* – substitute) for Christ on earth and only a male can represent the male Christ. They also argue that the New Testament records no woman as being among the disciples and apostles. Conservative Evangelical churches also refuse to accept women in leadership positions. Their objection is usually associated more with the quotation of scripture, such as the verses highlighted above, which appear to suggest a divinely ordained order of nature where men are in authority over women.

Thus both the Bible and the Christian tradition are seen to uphold sexism and patriarchy. The Bible sees woman's creation as derivative; in Genesis 2 Adam is created by God from the dust of the earth while Eve is created from one of Adam's ribs. Furthermore, Eve succumbed to sin before Adam, thus she lost the image of God and the authority which goes with it. The New Testament verses quoted above supported the view that women should have no leadership role in the church or in society. All this, according to feminists, was supported by the masculine imagery used to speak of and to God. Liturgies traditionally referred to God as 'He' and 'Him'. God is 'Father', 'Son', 'King', 'Lord', 'Judge', 'Master'. While theologically God is sexless, possessing neither masculinity nor femininity (as they are aspects of the created order), the almost exclusive use of masculine words and imagery have tended towards the view that God is male and thus men are closer to the divine and divinely appointed to their authoritative position in the world.

The feminist response

At its most basic, feminism is an egalitarian movement geared towards ensuring that women and men receive a fair and just treatment in the world, that they are both treated equitably. Sexism distorts male as well as female humanity, though its results are different for men and for women. Patriarchy victimises women, but in men it leads to self-destruction and threatens the existence of life and the

planet itself.⁹ As a result, feminists call for men to realize what it is to be male and give up their competitive, acquisitive and domineering spirit, while women must learn for themselves what it means to be female rather than accept the definition of it imposed on them by men.

Feminist theology supports this by examining the spiritual, the divine, the metaphysical, the real from the perspective of women.¹⁰ The fundamental axiom in feminist theology is that all theology primarily deals with religious experience. Because experience (and its interpretation) in whatever form they take, are human categories, then the experience has to be different depending on the human who experiences it. In other words, a man's experience and a woman's experience is, of necessity, different. Feminist theologians argue that the Christian tradition and theology has been shaped by men. It was done from the point of view of male experience, by men for men. When women do theology, so it is argued, they will come to different conclusions. In recent times it has been recognized that not all women and not all men share the same religious experience because they are all subject to other, usually context-based, forces. Afro-American women (for example) suffer the injustice of racism and, usually, poverty (they are often among the poorest in American society) as well as being subjugated by sexism. Such a recognition has given rise to the phenomenon of Womanist theology as an offshoot of feminist theology. Objections were made that feminist theology is largely intellectual and academic while also gaining its strength from the middle class.

Feminist critique of Christianity is largely concerned with the way in which talk about God, because it has almost exclusively used masculine words and imagery, has been responsible for patriarchy and sexism. At its most stark, it is revealed in the words of Mary Daly, among the most radical of proponents of feminist theology, that 'If God is male, then the male is God'.

Feminist Theology: Primary Characteristics

Feminist theologians have pointed to the power of language and of religious symbols to promote and convey hidden meanings and support the status quo. Calling God Father, king or Judge, as has been the case in Christian theology, has influenced people psychologically into believing that men, and the male role, are most important. This extends even to the use of the word 'God' itself which is, after all, the masculine form of the noun. As a result, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has suggested the terminology G*D, while Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests God/ess. This, she suggests, is a 'fuller divinity' in which the masculine and

⁹ Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, p. 178.

¹⁰ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, p. 189.

feminine forms of the word contribute without affecting the unity of the divinity. Thus Ruether upholds the essentially mysterious nature of the reality which theology is discussing.

This term is unpronounceable and inadequate. It is not intended as language for worship, where one might prefer a more corrective term, such as Holy One, or Holy Wisdom. Rather it serves here as an analytic sign to point toward that yet unnamable understanding of the divine that would transcend patriarchal limitations and signal redemptive experience for women as well as for men.¹¹

Feminist theology claims to be liberative, relational and inclusive.

Liberation

Liberation theologies, which have emanated from Latin America but have spread to other parts of the developing world, are based on the theological principle that God stands in solidarity with the poor. Yet 'poor' has become a technical term representing anyone who is excluded by socio-political as well as economic structures. Feminist theology relates to this as structures the world over – the remnants of patriarchy – exclude and oppress women because of their sex. This sexism is exacerbated by other cultural factors in the various parts of the world. In this way, economic poverty, sexual orientation, colour and race may conspire to ensure that women are doubly or even triply oppressed. Women's liberation begins with the affirmation that God stands with those who are victims and marginalized.

Inclusivism

Feminist theology is based on the axiom that theology arises from reflection on religious experience. This religious experience is universal. Rosemary Radford Ruether puts it slightly differently by negating the unique claim of Christianity. God, she says, did not speak 'once and for all' through a particular race (the Hebrews) and at a particular time (primarily first century Palestine). This is accompanied by a rejection of the claim that God speaks only to males and therefore in the Christian tradition and doctrines through the codification (by men) of that (male) experience. Instead, God is to be perceived at all times, in all places, by all people. This experience which, though common, is undefinable because it is unavoidably personal and individual, is what theology seeks to express and understand.

¹¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, p. 46.

Cleverly, Ruether's objection is to any system which causes the marginalisation of one group, a system which subjugates and ignores. When this happens, she claims, we are all affected. As a result, chauvinism in any form must be combated. For Ruether, androcentricism, the idea that a norm (whether that of white westerners, Christians, the privileged or, more specifically, the male) must be rejected and a holistic approach adopted. Humanocentrism, in which human beings adopt a more important place in creation than any other living organism, must be rejected.¹² In this way, human beings can be led into a more eco-friendly lifestyle which will help save the planet from ecological catastrophe.

Relationality

According to Celia Deane-Drummond, feminist theology, wherever it is done, is bound together by its emphasis on relationships based on a concern for a just communal life: 'The experience of life of ordinary women is commonly that dedicated to sustaining relationships within the family unit. In other words, self-determination is found within the context of relationships'.¹³

Conclusions

Feminist theology offers two particularly potent challenges to Christianity. Feminism's basic question concerns the ethical nature of Christianity. Can it be sustained if it promotes sexism and patriarchy? Some feminists have and have thus rejected it. The second challenge concerns whether or not Christianity is true. For some, Christianity does uphold truth and needs to be revised to eradicate its unethical appropriation of sexism (Rosemary Radford Ruether, Janet Martin Soskice). For others, its unethical appropriation of sexism means it cannot be true (Mary Daly, Daphne Hampson).

¹² Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, p. 20.

¹³ Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Handbook in Theology and Ecology* (London: SCM, 1996), p. 56.