

[The] challenge of gender issues to pastoral care does not simply involve the inclusion of women into traditions and models of ministry which otherwise remain unchanged. Instead, it is a programme for reconstituting the very values and assumptions which underpin Christian practice."¹

Elaine L. Graham.

I

Feminist theology's contribution to pastoral theology begins with its contribution to theology generally. Feminist theology seeks to understand and criticize male-dominated tradition and to challenge androcentric images of God and humanity. It argues for equality and right understanding of women and men to be sanctioned by contemporary theology and practice.²

Central to Christian understanding of humanity is that to be human is to be created in the image and likeness of God - the *imago Dei*. If this is so, it follows that our understanding of the nature of humankind and human experience will be based on our beliefs concerning the nature of God. Therefore, feminist critique of male-centred theological anthropology is intertwined with critique of androcentric tradition concerning the nature of God. The question "Is God male?" has a direct bearing on whether only male creatures can be those most perfectly made in *his* image.³ From this follows questions about the gender identity of those would minister as God's representatives.

Another important endeavour of feminist researchers is to recover women's stories and positive female images that have been hidden. Discovery of women's history subverts the androcentric paradigm.

In her writings⁴, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza offers a liberationist perspective on Biblical studies, refusing to relinquish the Bible to those who maintain its patriarchal character as Christian. Fiorenza uses four hermeneutical principles: (1) a hermeneutic of *suspicion*, that recognizes

¹ *Transforming practice: pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty* / Elaine L. Graham. - London: Mowbray, 1996, p.44.

² A succinct summary of the feminist contribution to theology generally is provided by Anne Carr's essay "The new vision of feminist theology," in *Freeing theology: the essentials of theology in feminist perspective* / Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed. - San Francisco: Harper, 1993, pp.5-29.

³ For an important example of writing on this topic, see *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse* / Elizabeth A Johnson. - New York: Crossroad, 1993.

⁴ Particularly *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*. - New York: Crossroads, 1983.

patriarchy and androcentrism in many texts; (2) a hermeneutic of *proclamation* that assesses which texts are suitable for liturgical use, (3) a hermeneutic of *remembrance*, that searches out women's history, to reconstruct the heritage of today; and (4) a hermeneutic of *creative actualization* that helps women reclaim (biblical) history by the use of historical imagination and through ritual and art.⁵ Fiorenza applies these principles to her Biblical studies, but the concepts are equally useful in other disciplines, such as pastoral theology.

Being human is not simply one's created nature - it is also the *experience* of being human. The experience of women *as* women (and men *as* men) is important to an understanding of the human experience. In feminist theology the starting point and perspective is often women's experience. This may be bodily experience (pregnancy, giving-of-birth), social experience, or historical experience. It may refer to women's unique individual experiences, or to their experience in community. It also refers to specifically Christian experience - women's special contribution to Christian life, and women's experience of exclusion from much that is church. Margaret Farley effectively encapsulates the program of feminist theology under three themes: (1) relational patterns among human persons, (2) human embodiment, and (3) human assessment of the meaning and value of the world of 'nature'.⁶

Feminist theology draws attention to the interrelationship between the experience, theory and practice, which are the heart of much contemporary thinking about pastoral theology. A distinctive of the feminist contribution, in common with other liberationist perspectives, is that it places experience and praxis at the centre of theological development. The challenge is to *interpret* experience, believing that the Word of God and the life of the spirit are incarnate in the experience of all Christians.

II

In addition to the general perspective of feminist theology, it also contributes specifically to pastoral theology and practice. Valerie DeMarinis offers reasons why feminist theology and psychosocial theory provide a unique

⁵ See Carr, *op.cit.*, p.18.

⁶ Farley, Margaret A. "Feminist theology and bioethics" *in* *Feminist theology: a reader* / edited by Ann Loades. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990, pp.238-254, at p.240.

resource for pastoral theology and psychology. First, feminist theology seeks to investigate carefully the core of beliefs, symbols, assumptions, and categories of meaning-making. Feminist thinking challenges us to recognize the need for nurture, sustenance, growth and the development of the whole person in the context of community. Secondly, DeMarinis argues, feminist thinking offers access to the wisdom that comes by challenging existing perceptions and disciplinary boundaries. Third, feminist theology and psychosocial theory understand belief systems and their influence to be an essential part of the way human life and relationships come to have meaning. Within a feminist framework, both theology and psychology respect the need to include religious belief and spirituality in our understanding of health and healing. Fourthly, feminist theology incorporates a *praxis* methodology, which demands that action and reflection work together. Theory is regarded as prototype rather than archetype - it must be open to critical questioning and change.⁷

DeMarinis has developed a concept of "critical caring". Though as basic as life itself, caring is not always health-producing. A critical approach (careful judgement and crucial intervention) is required to ensure that caring (appropriate concern) is also healing.⁸ One's worldview and one's understanding, for example, of human nature and instincts will determine one's approach to healing and pastoral care. "The critical question is: can a hermeneutical foundation create a worldview that understands and nurtures the relational and religious instincts?"⁹ DeMarinis argues that a feminist hermeneutic can create such a worldview. Some worldviews, on the other hand, do not recognize or nurture human growth and instincts, but rather work against them.

Critical caring understands human beings as persons whose health, hope, and happiness are based on attention to the relational and religious instincts. Recognition and nurturing of these instincts brings liberation from oppression both within the human being and among persons. Life's vision is one of liberation from oppression.¹⁰

⁷ DeMarinis, Valerie M. - *Critical caring: a feminist model for pastoral psychology*. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1993, p.18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.35.

Elaine Graham notes that, "One of the most contested areas in contemporary pastoral literature concerns those *persons* deemed fit to dispense care; the *methods* by which such care is administered; and the *locus* of purposeful care."¹¹ In the past, pastoral theology has tended to concentrate on the attributes of the good pastor. This necessarily means that pastoral theology, so understood, restricted itself to the work of male ordained persons. The needs of the *client* and relationships within the Christian community as a whole have not been central. Feminist theology criticises this traditional perspective of pastoral theology, shifting the agent and the locus of care away from the ordained minister and the ecclesiastical institution towards less structured settings and alternative communities of faith.

Though not negating the use of pastoral counseling, which tends to emphasize scientific and medical models of care, feminist reconstruction of pastoral theology seeks to use sacrament, prayer, sermon, and community life as sources for healing and community. Restoration of pastoral activity from feminist perspective encompasses not only individual care, but a diverse and complex set of pastoral practices.¹²

III

Hierarchical imposition of moral authority and norms is inappropriate in the postmodern era. The twentieth-century tradition of non-directive counseling aims more towards achievement of personal ethical sensibility and autonomy than conformity to external moral codes. As a result, "contemporary pastoral care finds itself with an impoverished vocabulary of moral discernment - in relation to the individual and the collective."¹³

The response of feminists (and others) to moral and ethical uncertainty has been twofold. The *first* response has been to focus on the social and political dimensions of care. A personalized approach to care obscures the extent to which social and economic factors impede our growth to full personhood. A liberationist perspective brings the impoverishment and

¹¹ Graham, Elaine L. - *Transforming practice: pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty*. - London: Mowbray, 1996, p.47.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.48

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.50.

oppression into critical focus. Pastoral theology is encouraged to move its priorities away from models of personal amelioration to promote strategies of social change and political intervention.¹⁴

A tension arises within feminist thinking between a desire for social change and community action and the importance of personal freedom to develop one's life and spirituality. The feminist desire for social and political equality is sometimes resolved through increased regulation and oversight. The actions thus inhibited may well have been unhelpful. But there is also a danger of hierarchy and institutionalization negating the very liberation the feminist seeks. (Just such a tension has arisen in the development and oversight of Clinical Pastoral Education, for example.¹⁵)

The freedom to develop an inner sense of self, based on one's own desires and understanding, has been an achievement of feminism valuable to both women and men. Therefore, feminism is itself challenged to avoid stereotypes.

Women's reconstruction process is an inner movement which has profound spiritual implications. It revises traditional models of spirituality and traditional models of society. Not all women want to work on the side of the oppressed in a society which denies that oppression exists... Not all women choose to or can move in a dialectic direction which questions 'the-powers-that-be'. We cannot judge those women who wish to remain in foreclosed identities. [...] Free women can also choose to be guardians in society, tending to hearth and home as women have done for centuries *but they are doing it freely*. These choices are to be valued. There is no 'right way' to be free. There are only many ways, as many as there are female hearts and souls.¹⁶

A *second*, closely-related, strategy for pastoral theology in the face of moral uncertainty is to draw on critically evaluated pastoral *practice* as a source of ethics and norms. Elaine Graham examines feminist practice for its own contribution and as an example of a liberationist approach to pastoral practice.

Criteria for authentic Christian pastoral practice as determined by a model of liberatory *praxis* locate human identity within history, and identify theological knowledge as arising from a specific context and harnessed to transformatory and political ends. Models of Christian pastoral practice within liberation theology ground the normative principles for social transformation in a model of action and reflection upon experience and social context. The criteria for

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.51, 136.

¹⁵ See Gleason, John J. - "The impact of feminism on Clinical Pastoral Education" *Journal of pastoral care* 52(1):3-5, Spring, 1998.

¹⁶ Slattery, Maureen - "Women and the new spiritual consciousness" *Pastoral sciences* 17:121-144, 1998, at p.141 (my emphasis).

authentic practice - the values of liberation - are both the sources and the objects of pastoral practice.¹⁷

Identity and knowledge as grounded in practice, Graham argues, bring into focus methods that are self-reflecting, yet still maintain ethical and political integrity - despite the absence of transcendent truth-claims.¹⁸ Critical self-understanding and practical wisdom are formed within a network of relationships, values and practices from which meaning is constructed and acted on.¹⁹

In *Transforming practice*, Graham draws on an analysis of feminist pastoral practices - in liturgy, spiritual direction, and preaching - to set out a "critical theory of pastoral practice".²⁰ Graham notes the benefits of women's stories being told by these means²¹. There is healing, reconciliation and empowerment. The naming of women's needs and experiences reveals the distortions and universalized prescriptions of androcentric practice. The rendition of women's experiences places them into their social and political context.

This emphasis on women's experience, Graham says, "may be understood as a plea for all theological discourse to recognize itself as *situated*, or as theologians more usually term it, *contextual*."²² The contribution of feminist theology has been to exemplify liberating practices and ways of thinking which benefit pastoral theology and practice in its ministry with all oppressed peoples.

IV

Ironically, postmodernism, by focusing on the social location of theory and acknowledging the plurality of human existence, has limited us to local systems of belief and values. Yet many feminists would claim a status of politics and advocacy for feminist thought and would seek a set of agreed principles so that ministry praxis can be developed. Christie Neuger, introducing a collection of case studies, suggests three approaches to this dilemma:

¹⁷ Graham, *op.cit.*, p.139.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.156.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.159.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.171.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp.193ff.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 194 (original emphasis).

- (1) claim the particularity of both theory and the situation where it is applied;
- (2) acknowledge that a theory is built of some generalizations and note the need for contextualization;
- (3) work at the meta-theory level - creating ways to guide the development of a theory of practice that takes seriously the diversity of people and the importance of particularity in pastoral work.²³

Though there may be difficulties in constructing a generalized ethic, feminist Christians have made strong and effective contributions to ethical reform in issues of pastoral concern. In discussing sexual ethics, for example, feminist writer Lisa Cahill moves away from narrowly defined, act-centred, definitions of morality and emphasizes the positive function in community building served by biblical teachings on sex.²⁴ Feminists also draw attention to sins easily hidden by an acceptance of the heterosexual, marital and procreative norms.

Consider, for example, domestic violence; sexual abuse; marital rape; callousness of men to the daily burdens of their wives; wives' and mothers' emotional manipulation of husbands and children; sexual objectification or coercion by men or women; neglect and abuse of children; narcissism of family members in their relations to one another; narcissism of families in relation to those outside their family, church, or community; consumerism; drugs and alcoholism; sloth toward the commitment it takes to sustain a marriage and be responsible parents; and the irresponsible divorce.²⁵

Not all feminists have abandoned the search for a common ethic. A paper by Linda Hogan,²⁶ for example, examines other authors' ideas for a non-relativist ethic and posits the legitimacy of a common morality. Suggested sources for such an ethic are (1) shared human nature, (2) non-relative virtues, and (3) abstract principles. But such attempts at a foundation for ethics encounter the essential feminist / post-structuralist critique that all such developments of ethical norms are but constructs of power and language.

²³ *Arts of ministry: feminist-womanist approaches* / Christie Cozad Neuger, ed. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1996, pp.4-5.

²⁴ Cahill, Lisa Sowle. - "Sexual ethics: a feminist Biblical perspective", *Interpretation* 49(1):5-16, January, 1995.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.14.

²⁶ Hogan, Linda - "Boundaries and knowledge: feminist ethics in search of sure foundations", in *Bodies, lives, voices: gender in theology* / edited by Kathleen O'Grady, Ann L. Gilroy and Janette Gray. - Sheffield: Academic Pr., 1998, pp. 24-39.

Neither are all feminists convinced by attempts to develop agreed-upon principles. Given the destabilized subject of post-modern feminism, Elizabeth Cady questions how normative judgements (theological or otherwise) can be made. She rejects an abstract unified subject. The identity of "woman" is multiple, but in each instance anchored in a limited time and place.²⁷ On this, Sarah Coakley cautions:

[As] the heady shift to post-modern relativism becomes an attractive philosophical option for increasing numbers of feminists, we may well question whether the Enlightenment demand for global principles in ethics (as opposed to purely *local* political agendas) can be lightly discarded when what we surely must still dream of is an abolition of the sex class system *tout court*.²⁸

Thus contemporary developments in philosophy and cultural theory temper the feminist contribution to theology. Modernist liberal feminism tended to assume a unified subject *woman*, but postmodernism proposes diversity and fragmentation. Thus Sue Thornham, writing on postmodernism and feminism says:

If feminists seek to construct a universal, 'essential' woman as subject and/or object of their own thought, then that figure will be as partial, as historically contingent and as exclusionary as her male counterpart. [...] Feminist theory cannot claim both that knowledge and the self are constituted within history and culture and that feminist theory speaks on behalf of a universalized 'woman'. Rather, it must embrace **differences** between women and accept the position of partial knowledge(s). And once it occupies this position, feminist thought would seem to move away from its Enlightenment beginnings and to have much in common with postmodernist theory.²⁹

Yet again, the importance of difference is debated. Rebecca Chopp describes the theoretical dilemma thus:

Feminist theorists criticize from a variety of perspectives the notion of an essential, universal structure of the human subject. Feminism, as a cultural movement, had its initial impetus through a banner of women's equality that presumed a universal category of woman which included all women. But feminist theorists soon realized that there is no such thing as one structure of *woman*. Cross-culturally what is represented as woman can vary widely. And woman or gender cannot be separated from other constitutive factors such as race, class, and religion.³⁰

²⁷ See Cady, Elizabeth Linell. - "Identity, feminist theory, and theology" in *Horizons in feminist theology: identity, tradition and norms* / edited by Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997, pp.17-32.

²⁸ Coakley, *op.cit.*, p.82.

²⁹ Thornham, Sue. - "Postmodernism and feminism (or: repairing our own cars)" in *The Icon critical dictionary of Postmodern thought*. - Duxford: Icon, 1998, pp.41-52, at pp.43-4.

³⁰ Chopp, Rebecca S. - "Theorizing feminist theology" in *Horizons in feminist theology: identity, tradition and norms* / edited by Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997, pp.215-231, at p.219.

Among the foci for debate in theory on the nature of the human subject, Chopp observes, is the question of the very usefulness of gender as a category for theory. Gender is a useful category in some cases and problematic in others. "How do we then employ the category to make sense of present structures of power and, at the same time, deconstruct the category so as to transform the way present structures require gender construction and regulation of gender?"³¹

The feminist claim to the *imago Dei* risks becoming an assertion that humankind is divided into two equal genders, male and female. This does not seem particularly startling, but has been seen by some³² as deployment of a hegemonic heterosexual binary. Thus Fulkerson finds that feminist theologians, when developing an understanding of the *imago Dei*, must continually ask who is being excluded.³³

This epitomizes the contribution made by feminists to pastoral studies. We ask, "who is being excluded?" and insist that all humankind must be *included* when we ponder who God has made us to be and who God desires that we become.

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³¹ *Ibid.*, p.220.

³² Such as Judith Butler in her *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. - New York: Routledge, 1990 [cited by Mary McClintock Fulkerson in "Identity, feminist theory, and theology" in *Horizons in feminist theology: identity, tradition and norms* / edited by Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997, pp.17-32, at p.109.

³³ *Op. cit.* I am assisted by Chopp's summary of Fulkerson's essay, *op.cit.*, p.222.

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