

## The feminist contribution to the study of Christian ethics,

by Brian McKinlay

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Feminist theology's contribution to Christian ethics 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 is 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?" bears on the androcentricity or otherwise of ideal behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

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.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza offers a liberationist perspective on Biblical studies<sup>3</sup>, refusing to relinquish the Bible to those who assert its patriarchal aspects to be normatively Christian. Fiorenza uses four hermeneutical principles<sup>4</sup> of which the best known is a hermeneutic of *suspicion* that recognises patriarchy and androcentrism in many texts. Fiorenza applies these principles to biblical studies, but they are also

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<sup>1</sup> 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. Catherine LaCugna provides an excellent outline in a couple of pages *God for us: the Trinity in Christian life*. - San Francisco: Harper, 1973, pp.267-8

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> Particularly *In memory of her: a feminist theological reconstruction of Christian origins*. - New York: Crossroads, 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Fiorenza's four hermeneutical principles are:

- a hermeneutic of *suspicion*, that recognizes patriarchy and androcentrism in many texts;
- a hermeneutic of *proclamation* that assesses which texts are suitable for liturgical (and ethical) use,
- a hermeneutic of *remembrance*, that searches out women's history, to reconstruct the heritage of today; and
- a hermeneutic of *creative actualization* that helps women reclaim (biblical) history by the use of historical imagination and through ritual and art.

useful in other disciplines, such as theological ethics. Margaret Farley also debates whether certain minimal standards can be sent over-against the Biblical text.

My concern here is precisely for the kind of conviction so basic to a person's understanding that contradictory witness cannot be believed without doing violence to one's self. ... The minimal claim I want to make ... is that included in feminist consciousness are some fundamental convictions so basic and so important that contradictory assertions cannot be accepted by feminists without violence being done to their very understandings and valuations. These convictions serve as a kind of negative test for revelation in knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

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 be personal experiences or experience in community. It also includes 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'.<sup>6</sup> Each has a bearing on ethics. Similarly, Carol Gilligan, who in her research<sup>7</sup> listens to women and girls talking about moral issues, identifies differences between American women's ethical conversation and the abstract language of traditional Western moral discourse.

As we listen more carefully to the moral voice that speaks about interdependence and the problems of detachment, of voice articulated more frequently by women, different ways of thinking about power emerge as well as different ways of understanding violence to others and to self.<sup>8</sup>

Gilligan's work left her with the crucial questions, "In whose terms do we speak?" and "Who is to define the terms of the discussion?"

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<sup>5</sup> Farley, Margaret A. - "Feminist consciousness and the interpretation of scripture", *in From Christ to the world: introductory readings in Christian ethics* / Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy and Alen Verhey, eds. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, pp.51-57, at p.52

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> Gilligan, Carol. - "A different voice in moral decisions", *in From Christ to the world: introductory readings in Christian ethics* / Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy and Alen Verhey, eds. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994, pp.172-176.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.176.

Thus, in addition to its general perspectives, feminism contributes specifically to ethical and moral development. Feminist theology draws attention to the interrelationship between experience, theory and practice. A distinctive of the feminist contribution, in common with other liberationist perspectives, is that it places experience and *praxis* at the centre. 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.

Valerie DeMarinis argues that feminist theology provides a unique resource through a *praxis* methodology. It seeks to investigate carefully the core of beliefs, symbols, assumptions, and categories of meaning-making. Theory is prototype rather than archetype - it must be open to critical questioning and change.<sup>9</sup> A feminist hermeneutic can create a worldview "that understands and nurtures the relational and religious instincts."<sup>10</sup>

Hierarchical imposition of moral authority and norms is seen by many as inappropriate in the postmodern era. Thus, for example, 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."<sup>11</sup>

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 moral decisions, for a personalized approach obscures social and economic factors impeding our growth to full personhood. A liberationist perspective brings impoverishment and oppression into critical focus. Ethical and pastoral theology are encouraged to promote strategies of social change and political intervention.<sup>12</sup>

Here 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. There is a danger of hierarchy

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<sup>9</sup> DeMarinis, Valerie M. - *Critical caring: a feminist model for pastoral psychology*. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr, 1993, p.18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51, 136.

and institutionalization negating the very liberation the feminist seeks.

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.

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.<sup>13</sup>

A *second*, closely-related, strategy in the face of moral uncertainty is to draw on critically evaluated *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 ethical and pastoral practice. 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 an absence of transcendent truth-claims.<sup>14</sup> Critical self-understanding and practical wisdom are formed within a network of relationships, values and practices from which meaning is constructed and acted on.<sup>15</sup> This emphasis on 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*."<sup>16</sup> Feminist theology seeks to exemplify liberating practices and ways of thinking.

Ironically, postmodernism, by focusing on the social location of theory and the plurality of human existence, limits 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 agreed principles and a common ethic so that ministry *praxis* can develop. Linda Hogan, 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.<sup>17</sup> But

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<sup>13</sup> Slattery, Maureen - "Women and the new spiritual consciousness" *Pastoral sciences* 17:121-144, 1998, at p.141 (my emphasis).

<sup>14</sup> *Transforming practice: pastoral theology in an age of uncertainty* / Elaine L. Graham. -London: Mowbray, 1996. p.156.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.159.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194 (original emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> 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.

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.

Following a survey of Christian feminist writing, Denise Carmody concludes that neglect of traditional Christian theology is a major lack in some Christian feminist work.<sup>18</sup> Her *Christian feminist theology*, is a keenly critical and feminist approach to ethical and other issues that is nevertheless well grounded in the tradition.

Though there may be theoretical difficulties in constructing a generalized ethic, feminist Christians have made strong and effective contributions to ethical reform. Their fields of endeavour have included criticism and action on poverty and inequality, sexual ethics, bioethics, ecology and our response to God's creation, and critique of unethical gender-based religious practice. 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

In seemingly all areas of ethics considered by feminist theologians, the value and content of their contributions are contested. Philosopher and Christian Harriet Baber, for example, argues that the only clearly objectionable aspects of Christianity from the point of view of a reasonable feminism are claims that men and women have different duties by virtue of gender alone. Baber contends that the promotion of inclusive language is questionable and argues that attempts to reconstruct theology and church to accommodate the style of behaviour, way of knowing and morality "thought to be characteristic of women's experience" is detrimental to women's interests.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Christian feminist theology: a constructive interpretation.* / Denise L. Carmody. - Oxford: Blackwell, 1995, p.206, citing her own work in other places.

<sup>19</sup> Cahill, Lisa Sowle. - "Sexual ethics: a feminist Biblical perspective", *Interpretation* 49(1):5-16, January, 1995.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>21</sup> Baber, Harriet. - "Feminism and Christian ethics" *Anglican theological review* 57(3)335-354, Summer 1995 at p. 335.

Nor are all feminists convinced by attempts to develop agreed principles. Given the destabilized subject of post-modern feminism, Elizabeth Cady asks how normative judgements (theological or otherwise) can be made. She rejects an abstract unified subject, "woman". The identity of "woman" is multiple, and in each instance anchored in a limited time and place.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Chopp observes, the very usefulness of gender as a category for theory is questioned. It is useful 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?"<sup>24</sup>

Thus contemporary developments in philosophy and cultural theory temper the feminist contribution to theology and to Christian ethics in particular. Modernist liberal feminism tended to assume a unified subject *woman*, but postmodernism proposes diversity and fragmentation. Therefore, 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*.<sup>25</sup>

The feminist claim to the *imago Dei* also 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 some<sup>26</sup> as deployment of a hegemonic

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<sup>22</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> 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.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.220.

<sup>25</sup> Coakley, *op.cit.*, p.82.

<sup>26</sup> 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.

heterosexual binary. Thus Fulkerson finds that feminist theologians, when developing an understanding of the *imago Dei*, must continually ask who is being excluded.<sup>27</sup>

This epitomizes the contribution made by feminists to Christian ethical thinking. We ask, "who is being excluded?" and insist that all humankind must be *included* when we ponder how we should live.

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<sup>27</sup> *Op. cit.* I am assisted by Chopp's summary of Fulkerson's essay, *op.cit.*, p.222.

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