

Feminist implications for theological anthropology,

by Brian McKinlay

Theological anthropology, itself a relatively new member of the family of theological concerns, raises and answers the question, "What does our faith teach us about the mystery of being human?" While every faith tradition has an implicit or explicit theological anthropology, what distinguishes Christian anthropology is that it answers the question on the basis of the Christian revelation and on the experience of life in the Christian community of believers. - *Mary Aquin O'Neill*¹

I

Theological anthropology is the discussion, from the perspective of God-centred faith, of what it is to be truly human. Central to Christian understanding of being human is that it is to be created in the image and likeness of God² - the *imago Dei*. But 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.

Feminist theology seeks to understand and criticize past and present androcentric tradition and to challenge androcentric images of humanity and of God. Further, it argues for equality and right understanding of women and men to be sanctioned by contemporary theology and practice. This essay considers the contribution of feminist views to theological anthropology under these headings (in Parts II and III respectively).

If to be human is to be created in the image and likeness of God, it follows that our understanding of the nature of humankind 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 and dominant male images 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. Feminist writing on gender-based imagery of God is relevant to our topic,³ but

¹ O'Neil, Mary Aquin. - "The mystery of being human together" in *Freeing theology : the essentials of theology in feminist perspective*. - HarperSanFrancisco, 1993, p.139-160, at p.140.

² "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1.27, NRSV).

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

in this essay I concentrate on work directly concerned with the nature and experiences of women and men as such.

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. Again, however, I have not dealt further with this topic.

The essay also notes briefly some theoretical challenges confronting feminists (including theologians) as they seek to present the feminist case in the present environment of cultural and intellectual change.

II

Christian history is one of deep contradiction in its attitude to women. There has always been proclamation of all humans as being created by God and saved by Christ. Yet Christendom's understanding of human nature has too often been cast in male generic terms. Feminist theologians have employed critical history to discover and explain the androcentric roots of historical phenomena and the traditions we have drawn from them. This can best be illustrated by summarizing a few findings of these historical explorations, concentrating on what they have to say about our topic - the nature of the human, especially differences between men and women.

For Plato (427-347 BCE), the difference between men and woman consisted mainly in their differing reproductive roles, but he allowed that this difference need not determine the whole of life. His student, Aristotle (384-322 BCE), was much less optimistic toward women. He defined 'form' as superior to 'matter'; in reproduction 'form' came from the male and the female supplied the 'matter'. The female was deficient, lacking full reproductive capacity and fulfilling a lower function than the male. Since, for Aristotle, a thing is what it is because of its function, this lowliness of female function determined an inferiority of being.⁴

Feminist writers⁵ argue that Jesus's earliest followers in Palestine adopted an anti-familial code, rejecting patriarchal family bonds for the sake of the gospel. With

⁴ See Maloney, Linda M. - "The argument for women's difference in classical philosophy and early Christianity" in *The Special nature of women?* / edited by Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. - London SCM Press, 1991 (*Concilium* 1991/6), pp. 41-49.

⁵ E.g. Maloney, *op.cit.*, pp.46ff.

patriarchy abolished, wife-husband roles were to be transformed into mutual service. It was not long, however, before Christian thinking and practice began to reverse this trend. In I Corinthians (11.7-8) Paul emphasizes the man as image of God and the woman as the image or 'glory' of the man. There was concern about offending the surrounding society (I Cor. 10.32). Christians lived in a society that agreed with Aristotle that the status quo was all there is.

In classical Greece and in Hellenistic society [...] [a]ny challenge to prescribed social roles for women ... demanded an assault on the family system centred on the reproductive paradigm. ... Christian challenges to the rigid pattern of male-female relationships were suppressed, sometimes from outside the community, but more often from within. Still, the gospel writers managed, at the same time, to preserve the 'dangerous memory' of the challenge, founding it on the practice and words of Jesus, and maintaining it as a hope for the future.⁶

The early church fathers presumed women to be unequal and fundamentally inferior in nature, though equal in the order of grace. They thought of women as lacking equality in the image of God and as under male headship in the created order. But in the ultimate salvation of Christ, this patriarchal hierarchy was to be annulled, there being no longer male or female (Gal. 3.28). Today, as Ruether observes, we have a reversed situation in which women have become equal in nature (secular society) but unequal in grace (in Christ and the [Catholic] church).⁷

This hierarchical ordering of nature and grace echoes the scholastic or Thomistic tradition. Thomas Aquinas drew on Aristotelian biology to declare that women were defective humans, lacking the full human nature present only in males. Christ had to be male to possess the full humanness. But Aquinas assumed that this inequality was overcome by the grace of salvation in Christ. Thomistic tradition, Ruether contends, is at the root of the 1976 Vatican declaration that women cannot be ordained because they do not image Christ.⁸

Both in the interpretation of Scripture (especially the creation stories) and in the making of Christian theology, there has been a presupposition of man as principal and woman as 'other' - woman as derived from man, or explained as a negation or

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.48.

⁷ Ruether, Rosemary Radford - "The Women's difference and equal rights in the church" in *The Special nature of women?* / edited by Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. - London SCM Press, 1991 (*Concilium* 1991/6), pp. 11-18, at p.14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.15

reduction of man. Yet there have been counter traditions to this andronormative pattern. These have been set aside in the past but are now being brought to light, giving historical roots to feminist theological anthropology. Thus Elisabeth Gössmann, for example, takes five patristic and medieval theological traditions and compares them to neglected woman-centred or egalitarian traditions of similar period:⁹

<i>Tradition</i>	<i>Counter-tradition</i>
Adam, first to be created, the perfect image of God; the woman derived from man (Gen. 2).	Eve, God's masterpiece, the last to be created, the perfected gift.
Sinful Eve (Peter Lombard)	Eve, deceived or indeed innocent (Christine de Pizan / Lucretia Marinalle)
The active man and the passive woman	The co-operation of the sexes
Woman, disadvantaged by the natural order, natural law and divine law. (Franciscan Summa Halensis / Hugo Grotius / Thomas Aquinas)	Male usurpation (Marguerite of Navarre)
Women are to become male (Gospel of Thomas / Ambrose / Jerome)	We shall encounter Christ in the completeness of our sex (Hildegard of Bingen)

Every period of Christian and related Western history has been criticised by feminists for its statements on the nature of woman. The reformers do not escape criticism, Luther for example.¹⁰ His views on Christian women are complex. He said much to honour the place of woman as mother and governor of the home. But in other respects he belittled women. He denied in women a capacity for reason and wisdom. They have, he said, "inherited from Eve their tendency to believe in lies and nonsense."¹¹

⁹ Gössmann, Elisabeth. - "The construction of women's difference in the Christian theological tradition" in *The Special nature of women?* / edited by Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. - London SCM Press, 1991 (*Concilium* 1991/6), pp.50-59.

¹⁰ See Weisener, Merry. - Luther and women : the death of two Marys" reprinted in *Feminist theology : a reader* / edited by Ann Loades. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990, pp.123-134.

¹¹ Quoted, *ibid.*, p.129.

But some critique requires a more sophisticated analysis than would appear from such easily contradicted views.¹² Luther contrasted the self-centred life, in which sin will occur, with a life lived in God, through Christ. Christians must centre their lives outside themselves. Daphne Hampson is respectful of Luther's great achievements, but contends that feminists conceive of the human person in different ways from this. "They speak of women as having an essential connectedness with others, a relationality that is integral to the self," she says.¹³ Many feminists are unhappy with the disjunction between mind and body prevalent in masculine thought and implicit in Luther's theology.

Of the Enlightenment, Sarah Coakely writes, "Our Enlightenment heritage is not easily dispelled; indeed without it, it is hard to imagine modern western feminism having taken the form it has in the first place."¹⁴ Yet the ideas of the seventeenth and eighteenth century do not escape feminist critique. Important writers including Bacon, Descartes, Rousseau and Kant produced confused, confusing and unequal ideas about sexual relationships and the nature of women,¹⁵ the sexism of which the Romantics did little to redress.¹⁶

An all-embracing criticism of many of the strange and androcentric ideas about the nature of woman that have emerged in Western history is that they are simply speculative and lacking evidence. Consequently, they are too often based on prejudices and irrelevancies in the mind of the (usually male) author, though we have seen examples (as in Hampson's critique of Luther) where the issues are more subtle. Mere awareness that one is a man or a woman does not convey understanding.

In their text on theological anthropology, Paul Jewett and Marguerite Schuster commend respect for mystery and the unknowable:

Not that theology places a premium on ignorance, but it is always done best when it is done with a little humility. ... Not only have theologians been overly confident in the light of empirical data, in their understanding of the difference between man and woman,

¹² As in every age, some reformers were simply misogynist, such as John Knox who published a pamphlet infamously titled *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous regiment of women* (1558).

¹³ Hampson, Daphne. - "Luther on the self : a feminist critique" reprinted in *Feminist theology : a reader* / edited by Ann Loades. - Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990, pp.215-225, at p.219.

¹⁴ Coakley, Sarah. - "Gender and knowledge in Western philosophy : the 'Man of Reason' and the 'Feminine' 'Other' in Enlightenment and Romantic thought" in *The Special nature of women? /* edited by Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. - London SCM Press, 1991 (*Concilium* 1991/6), pp.75-83, at p.82.

¹⁵ See Coakley, *op.cit.*, pp.76-80.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.80-82.

but they have also erred in assuming that the woman is to be understood in terms of her sexuality in a way that the man is not. They have taken their text from Byron rather than the Bible:

Man's love is of man's life a thing apart;
'Tis woman's whole existence.

... Even when Christian thinkers do not profess to understand the woman in terms of her sexuality, even when they admit to a mystery that they cannot fathom, they tend to forget the duality of our humanity and focus on the mystery of the woman's nature in a derogatory way.¹⁷

Jewett and Schuster quote Simone de Beauvoir:

Surely woman is, in a sense mysterious ... to men's eyes the capacity of the self-knowing self, of the *pour-soi*, is denser in the other feminine. ... The truth is that there is mystery on both sides: as the other who is of masculine sex, every man, also, has within him a presence, an inner self impenetrable to woman: she in turn is in ignorance of the male's erotic feeling. But ... the categories in which men think of the world are established from their point of view as absolute: they misconceive reciprocity, here as everywhere. A mystery for man, woman is considered to be mysterious in essence.¹⁸

"To acknowledge that they may have erred in that they have 'misconceived reciprocity'," Jewett and Schuster suggest,¹⁹ "is the first step male theologians must take when they address the mystery of human sexuality."

III

Valerie Saiving's 1960 article "The human situation: a feminine view"²⁰ is widely regarded as a starting point for contemporary feminist theological anthropology. She questioned whether, when theologians speak of "man", they were using the word in its generic sense. She criticised Niebuhr and others who identified sin with pride and self-assertion and love with selflessness. Her article postulated an interplay of character with experience, each forming the other. Many of the characteristic emphases of contemporary (1950s) theology, Saiving said, depended on aspects of human experience which apply to most men but only a minority of women:

... its definition of the human situation in terms of anxiety, estrangement, and the conflict between necessity and freedom; its identification of sin with pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness, and the treatment of others as objects rather than persons ... it is clear that such an analysis of man's dilemma was profoundly responsive and relevant to the concrete facts of modern man's existence. ... however, this theology is not adequate to the universal human situation; its inadequacies clearer to no one than

¹⁷ Jewett, Paul K., with Margaret Shuster. - *Who we are: our dignity as human : a neo-evangelical theology*. - Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, pp.177-178.

¹⁸ de Beauvoir, Simone. *The second sex*, pp.240-1, quoted by Jewett and Schuster, op.cit., pp.178-9.

¹⁹ *Op.cit.*, p.179

²⁰ Saiving, Valerie. - "The human situation : a feminine view" in *Womanspirit rising : a feminist reader in religion* / edited by C.Christ and J.Plaskow. - San Francisco, 1979, pp.25-42 [reprinted from *Journal of religion*, 40:100-112, 1960].

to certain contemporary women. ... They believe in the values of self-differentiation, challenge, and adventure and are not strange is to that "divine discontent" which has always driven men. Yet these same women value their femininity also ... They want, in other words, to be both women *and* full human beings.

Saiving made some strong, (though, in my view, not always well supported), assertions about differences between man and women.²¹

It is my contention that there are significant differences between masculine and feminine experience and that feminine experience reveals in an or emphatic fashion certain aspects of the human situation which are present but less obvious in the experience of men.

Whether or not her observations were completely accurate, the important thing about Saiving's contribution was that she drew attention to the need to consider difference between men and women when formulating theological ideas. In the context of the 1950s and 60s, hers was a strong criticism of theologies that generalized from middle class Western masculine experience, assuming it to be universal human experience.

Saiving's ideas were taken up by Judith Plaskow in her 1975 Yale thesis,²² in which she criticised Niebuhr²³ and Tillich²⁴ of identifying male experiences of sin and grace with universal truth. Niebuhr, for example:

...in claiming that the primary formal sin is pride and the primary fruit of grace sacrificial love focuses on aspects of human experience more likely to be associated with men than with women in western society, and thus both ignores and reinforces the experiences of women.²⁵

Identification of pride as the *primary* sin is not helpful to women, for many of whom positive self-assertion is most likely a virtue. Women's sins are likely to be based in other failings. Unlike Saiving, however, Plaskow did not argue for a generalized statement of essential feminine characteristics. "I am ... not arguing for the

²¹ For example:

"The man's sense of his own masculinity, then, is throughout characterized by uncertainty, challenge, and the feeling that he must again and again prove himself a man. It also calls for a kind of objective achievement and a greater degree of self-differentiation and self development than are required of the woman *as* woman. In a sense, masculinity is an endless process of *becoming* while in femininity the emphasis is on *being*." - Saiving, *op.cit.*, p32.

²² Published as *Sex, sin and grace : women's experience and the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich*. - Lanham: Uni. Pr. of America, 1980.

²³ Particularly his *Nature and Destiny of Man*. - New York: Scribner's, 1964.

²⁴ In, for example, his *Systematic theology*. - Chicago Uni. Pr., 1951-63.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p.51.

universality of my own definition of women's experience", she said. "My view ... is one view of modern, white, Western, middle-class women's experience."²⁶

There are many more objects of criticism in contemporary theology than can be mentioned here. Feminist thinkers have shown, for example, that the very maleness of Jesus has been and is still being used as a basis on which to devalue women's ministry. That is, Christology has been used as a basis for *anthropological* arguments. This has particularly been an issue in debates concerning the ordination of women, notably in the Roman Catholic Church.²⁷

Having made criticisms of historical and contemporary theology, feminist theologians face the challenge of building positive foundations for a theological anthropology. Authors such as Saiving and Plaskow drew attention to the importance of women's experience as a theological resource. But how could this experience be turned into theological ideas? If the characteristics of woman's innate nature could be identified, her place in the universe could be better described. But as Zappone asks, "What determines woman's nature? Is it biology, socio-cultural expectations, or historical experiences? Is woman closer to nature than man?"²⁸

An essay published by Audre Lorde in 1980, in which she memorably described herself as a "49-year-old Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two", stressed that women's difference from one another is as significant as their difference from men. These differences have to be recognized by theorists if they care for the dignity, equality and freedom of *all* women.²⁹

Following Janet Sayers work, *Biological politics*³⁰, Zappone argues that biology *does* make a difference. Biology, interacting with socio-economic and historical factors, directly affects women's experiences within the social order. Women's equality will be better achieved when adequate account is taken of material differences. Experiences such as menstruation and childbearing are not uniformly positive or negative and should not be ignored. These differences of experience

²⁶ *Ibid.* p.6.

²⁷ For a discussion by a Catholic feminist of developments in theological anthropology, see: O'Neil, *op.cit.*

²⁸ Zappone, Katherine E. - "'Woman's special nature': a different horizon for theological anthropology" in *The Special nature of women? /* edited by Anne Carr and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. - London SCM Press, 1991 (*Concilium* 1991/6), pp. 87-97, at p.87.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.88.

contribute to deconstruction of patriarchal ideology of women's 'special nature'.³¹ But beyond this, theologians are challenged to take positive account of all human difference. Not merely do women's experiences supplement theological anthropology, Zappone argues,³² but they are a resource for *better* theology.

A further example of difference in experience is racial and cultural difference in women's relationship with nature. Susan Thistlethwaite³³ suggests that whereas white feminists have emphasized the harmonious, good and creative aspects of nature, womanist (non-White) reflection has focused more on its conflictual and destructive aspects. Some identify culture as positive and nature as harmful, others the reverse.

The challenge of doing theology that allows for these and many other differences in human nature and experience, is a challenge for feminists and all theologians. The contribution of feminists to theological anthropology has been to demonstrate and emphasize the importance of this challenge. Much of the task is still ahead, and there are considerable theoretical challenges.

V

Contemporary developments in philosophy and cultural theory temper the contribution of feminists to theological anthropology. Modernist liberal feminism has assumed 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.³⁴

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

³⁰ Sayers, Janet. - *Biological politics: feminist and anti-feminist perspectives*. - London, 182.

³¹ Zappone, *ibid.*, p.91.

³² *Ibid.*, p.94.

³³ *Sex, race and god: Christian feminism in Black and White*. - New York, 1989, as summarized by Zappone, *op.cit.*, p. 93.

³⁴ 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.

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. All such representations of a common structure of woman inevitably reflect the experience and interests of those in power more than the experiences of all persons. Some feminist theorists may insist on the strategic importance of maintaining the category for political action but very few feminist theorists espouse anything like an essential structure to the category of woman.

Though there is significant agreement in the opposition to the notion of a universal structure of woman, there is substantial disagreement about how to speak of the human *subject* in ways other than those implied in a universal structure.³⁵

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. "How does the subject in gender or the gendered subject both deconstruct the universalizing of gender and work for change for women?"³⁶ 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?"³⁷

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.³⁸ 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*.³⁹

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

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.220.

³⁸ 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.

³⁹ Coakley, *op.cit.*, p.82.

startling, but has been seen by some⁴⁰ as deployment of a hegemonic heterosexual binary. Thus Fulkerson finds that feminist theologians, when developing an understanding of the *imago Dei*, must continually explore who is being excluded.⁴¹ For example, Paula Coe asks whether consideration of the *imago Dei* excludes "bad" women (child abusers and murderers, for example).⁴² In identifying with the *imago Dei*, the gendered subject must continually consider whom she or he is excluding.

This demand epitomizes the contribution made by feminists to theological anthropology. 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 what God desires that we become.

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⁴⁰ 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.

⁴¹ *Op.cit.* I am assisted by Chopp's summary of Fulkerson's essay, *op.cit.*, p.222.

⁴² "In the last analysis, even to those who seek to bear witness to them, bad women remain other, and this otherness stands in judgement of all theoretical and theological attempts to proclaim, construct, explain, or describe what it means to be human, convicting theoretician and theologian alike." - Coe, Paula M. "Bad women : the limits of theory and theology" in *Horizons in feminist theology: identity, tradition and norms* / edited by Rebecca Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997, pp. 137-153 at p.153.

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