



Contemporary Feminism and Christian Doctrine of the Human

PATRICIA WILSON-KASTNER

United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, New Brighton, Minnesota

What has feminism to do with theology? What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? A great deal. This article makes a major claim: feminist theory, both in its radical and its reformist guises, contributes insights of great value in the necessary renewal of the Christian understanding of the human. Before proceeding to the body of our discussion, it is necessary to define two major terms.

Feminism is a widespread and complex movement, encompassing everything from “equal pay for equal work” to advocacy of lesbian separatism. When the word “feminism” is used here without other qualification, it focuses the reader on shared goals of the movement: the sense that women are equally human beings with men, that they should be regarded as such in all dimensions of private and public life, and that appropriate social changes should be made to ensure that women are so treated if they are not already.¹

Two subheadings of the term feminism are of particular importance in this context as they apply to theology and the church: (a) reformist and (b) revolutionary or radical feminism. Reformist feminism assumes that there is much evil and oppression in the church and its doctrine which have contributed to the suppression of women, and that whatever is wrong must be changed. Such modifications and even dramatic transformations must take place within a context which assumes that God is indeed manifest to us in Christ, and that the church, despite its faults, is God’s agent of redemption. The church needs repentance, reform, and reconstruction according to new insights which may enable the gospel to shine forth more truly.

On the other hand, radical feminism rejects on principle Christianity (and Judaism and Islam, and presumably Buddhism, Taoism, et al.) because it is a male construct, and consequently by definition hopelessly corrupt. Radical or revolutionary feminists claim that women can only find their true identities

¹For a summary of issues about feminist terminology, see Gayle Graham Yates, *What Women Want* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1975) 1-34.

through rejection of all patriarchal religion and the construction of new feminist religions. Contemporary witchcraft is a favored religion, because it is claimed to be a genuinely “women’s religion.”²

The other major term is Christian doctrine of the human or Christian anthropology. An older English term is “the doctrine of man,” obviously unacceptable because the language is not inclusive. To speak of a Christian doctrine of the human, or anthropology, serves to remind Christians that our distinctive approach to the human condition explores its relation to God and to the self, other selves, and the whole cosmos, in perspective of our common relationship to

God. This article suggests that contemporary feminism challenges some fundamental, though not necessarily essentially Christian, assumptions theology has relied on.

I. CHALLENGES OF FEMINISM

In such a brief article as this, one could introduce the challenges of feminism to the Christian theology of the human either by separating the various groups of feminist theorists, or by identifying the issues they raise. I have chosen the latter course, in order to focus more clearly on the queries feminism raises about the Christian tradition.

1. *Can one speak meaningfully of humanity?* Ultimately this is the most fundamental question feminism raises for theological anthropology. The issue is both straightforward and complex. Simply stated, radical feminists, and some reformist feminists, assert that there are two quite distinct sorts of human persons, male and female, with different types of intellectual and personal characteristics. Men are rational, controlling, and scientific in their approaches to the world; women are intuitive, nurturing, and aesthetic in their outlook. These differences are innate in women and men, at least inasmuch as we can judge, and thus by necessity women's and men's experiences are different. Some radical feminists would argue that men are fundamentally inferior to women; most would say that women's characteristics are superior; a few would simply identify differences without evaluating them; most would suggest that both men and women must strive to have something of the identifiable qualities of the other sex.

Mary Daly, Carol Christ, Anne Ulanov and others all express variations on this position.³ However, some Christian feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Letty Russell insist that for the Christian there can be no such division: that all human beings are created as essentially the same humanity, are subject to the same sorts of temptations, capable of the same sort of good, and in need of the same sort of healing.⁴ There are differences between men and women, which may be more than simply the product of socialization, but sexu-

²Brief definitions of those themes are given in Rosemary Ruether, "Goddesses and Witches: Liberation and Countercultural Feminism," *Christian Century* 97 (Sept. 10-17, 1980) 842-847; Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Christianity and the New Feminist Religions," *Christian Century* 98 (Sept. 9, 1981) 864-868.

³For example, Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 39-42, 319-320; Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing* (Boston: Beacon, 1980) xi.

⁴Rosemary Ruether, "Liberation and Countercultural Feminism," 844-845; Letty Russell, *The Future of Partnership* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979) 46-53.

ally related differences are one factor among many which make up the human complexity of the person. Incidentally, Christian feminists suggest that radical feminists have bought the old supremacist notion of a separate women's nature; but instead of regarding it as inferior, they have said that the intuitive woman is superior to the rational man.

Is human community possible? How can it be if there is no common "humanity" as foundation of the community? Lesbian separatism is the only logical position for one who accepts a pure feminist position: how can males and females have anything to do with each other if they are two sorts of persons? The vision is as impossible as is that of an integrated society to a black or white supremacist. Within the context of a Christian community, I would contend that one can be lesbian, gay, married, single, or any one of a number of ways of organizing one's sexual and affectional preferences. The radical feminist says that only one is possible among women, and that men are by definition excluded. There is no Christian community which can

unite, because there is no “humanity” which can be united. If Christian anthropology cannot respond to this challenge, it might as well pack its bags and go home.

2. *Is there evil in persons?* Very generally among feminists, particularly among radical feminists, evil is explained as being extrinsic to women. Either it is regarded as the oppression wrought upon women over the course of human history, or in a related analysis, it is the evil in men which leads them to create an oppressive structure which keeps women as inferiors.⁵ Evil in either case is extrinsic to women, who are represented either as the victims of evil and oppression, or as the strong, nurturing offspring of the life force, personified as the Mother Goddess. Even such a biblically centered theologian as Letty Russell focuses on the good in women, and has almost nothing to say about the force of evil in them. Ruether is one of the few to insist firmly on the ambiguity and evil in both men and women.

The controversy about evil in persons is obviously related to the first issue noted here, that of the unity of humanity. Particularly for radical feminists, because men and women are two different sorts of people, one can easily suggest that evil is intrinsic to, or almost inevitably connected with, males, but not with females. Many feminist theorists seem to have adopted the romantic nineteenth century notion of “good” women taming and civilizing “evil” men, whose bestial urges are held in check by woman’s superior virtuous character. Such an approach vitiates the observation of the ambiguity of behavior and desires in women and men, both of whom are observed from time to time to do those things which they ought not to do, and not to do those things which they ought to do. Instead, women are prevented from admitting and dealing with evil within them, by denying that evil can be in them, because it is asserted to be extrinsic to the female character.

3. *How can one speak of human value?* For many radical feminists the very language of good and evil is fallacious. The wholeness of the world described by different theorists in various ways encompasses what we have called good and evil;

⁵M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) 44-68.

they assert that in reality such thinking is a false dichotomizing.⁶ The basis of value is not the patriarchy’s estimation, but women’s experience, which makes them feel fulfilled and satisfied. Women’s experience, in all its richness and complexity, because of its rootedness in the power of life, provides a basis for making choices, and deciding what would be beneficial.⁷

Such an approach should not be surprising on the basis of an approach which claims that women and men are different sorts of persons. Without a fundamental unity, how could one begin to speak of shared values, or even a common search for good? Furthermore, if the intuitively based experience of women is the foundation for value, how can one woman speak to another about value? Radical feminism assumes that women of good will and honesty will share their stories and find common values together. One should note that all feminism, radical and reformist, assumes a standard of good and evil. One of the most frequently asserted values is a positive, life affirming approach, in harmony with the cosmos.⁸ But with an increasingly narrow understanding of acceptable behavior and proper humanity (such as Mary Daly’s insistence that only women who live in separation from men are fully feminists), the numbers of those who can agree on values grows smaller. The base of the search for values in witchcraft is at least as narrow as in biblical fundamentalism,⁹ except in different directions.

The fundamental questions radical feminism raises in new and intense forms must be

responded to by their reformist feminist colleagues and all other Christians if any Christian anthropology worth its salt is to take shape. Are we a human community? What is the base for human discussion of value? What enables us to discern what is good and what is harmful for ourselves and for others? Any renewed theology which cannot discern the ethical consequences of our humanity, individually or communally, is useless.

II. WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF THE HUMAN?

How much of a challenge are these assertions of feminist theorists? As they relate to traditional Christian teachings, unquestionably a great gap exists in some areas. An obvious beginning point is the Christian insistence that there is only one sort of human being. Otherwise only men (or women) could be baptized, pray, etc. The unity of humanity is the basis of the church; grace calls all human beings into one people in God. All of us are affected by evil; no matter how we explain the process, the Christian tradition insists that all of us share in evil decision-making through our own choice as soon as we are able to choose. Evil is not something only in others; it is in us, all of us. But at the same time each of us finds good and evil mingled within; all of us who make decisions, who are ethical beings, do not rely on ourselves alone to determine how we ought to make our choices. The basis of our decision-making is our existence as God's children, and

⁶Carol Ochs, *Beyond the Sex of God* (Boston: Beacon, 1977) 133-143; Carol Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess," *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. C. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 283-285.

⁷C. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*, 129-131.

⁸C. Christ, *Womanspirit Rising*, 284-285.

⁹Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 17-33.

our endeavor to live according to that which God has given us to see. Ultimately God is the ground of our efforts to choose rightly.

If in fact Christianity had always so taught about human beings, we could conclude the discussion rapidly. But history is more complex. The church has indeed insisted that we are all one in Christ: just as all sinned in Adam, so all are made alive in Christ. But the Adam/Christ comparison put a peculiar cast on the church's understanding of the unity of humanity. All are human, but some people are more human than others. Because Adam and Christ were both male persons, and the individuals in charge of the church and the social structure were also male, it was a very small jump for theologians and religious teachers to conclude that normative humanity was male humanity, and that female was not quite as human.

For instance, in the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas argued very clearly that because according to science (Aristotelian biology) women are inferior, misbegotten men, women are unsuited for ordination. They can be baptized and be saved, but are not by nature equal to men. In devotional literature for many centuries, the way that women were admitted to spiritual equality with men was for them to become like men, to be virile in their virtue. By giving up the exercise of their sexuality and being celibate, women could approximate the manly life of virtue, even though the achievement of such virtue was acknowledged in the next life, not this one. In Protestant circles after the Reformation, women were primarily exhorted to virtues appropriate to their submissive female, and ordinarily married state. Consequently their virtues were rather dull compared to male virtues, and were always recognized as lower in the hierarchy of goodness.

In short, the almost universal Christian interpretation of Christian anthropology depended on a theology which in practice considered Adam, the first human, as a male person, and Eve as an appendage who was responsible for tempting Adam to sin. Instead of concluding that Eve had the possibilities for greater good and greater evil, however, Adam was asserted to be the more important, the father of humanity, and weak Eve was subordinate to him. Christ, the new Adam, was a male person, actively healing the human condition. If there was a new Eve, it was Mary, Jesus' mother, who was regarded as the passive recipient of Jesus' healing grace. In light of the two figures of Adam and Jesus, the *imago dei* in humanity unmistakably had a male face. Even if that was not made explicit in strict theological terms, it was driven home in sermons, devotional literature, poetry, and art. In this life the Christian could be sure that woman was an inferior human, and her nature and her behavior, actual and hoped for, was lesser than a male's.

III. A RENEWED CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

The complex picture which greets us as we confront the challenges of feminism to Christian anthropology and the weakness of our inherited theology and devotion thus involves us in two sorts of activities. One is setting the limits: deciding which of the insights of contemporary feminism are appropriately incorporated into a Christian vision of the world, and identifying those interpretative practices of the Christian tradition which are properly ruled out of bounds in any reconstruction of the Christian faith animated by feminism. The second activity is the actual rein-

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terpreting of the Christian tradition in light of its dialogue with feminism. My focus in the rest of this brief introduction will be primarily on the second task.

If we could identify one single theme which dominates the concerns of feminists of all sorts, it is the search for a less dualistic and more wholistic understanding of the human being and the human relationship to God. The range of responses to that need is wide. For instance, feminists have reinterpreted the human relationship to God in every way from an abolition of the notion of God as false and oppressive myth to a reinterpretation of the idea of God as One who has voluntarily entered into a close and intimate partnership with human persons. As we have seen previously, a correspondingly wide variation of reinterpretations of the human have also emerged in feminist circles.

Any comprehensive notion of the human which is adequate to a Christianity seriously coping with feminist issues must incorporate a notion of humanity which is one, in which there are no divisive factors in its notion of the human. Who is "Adam," we must ask again, and who is "Christ"? Phyllis Trible has been particularly helpful to Christian feminists in her reconstruction of the Hebrew Bible's notion of Adam. She very carefully demonstrates that both creation accounts in Genesis underline in various ways the equality in creation between male and female persons. In the second account (Gen 2:4-25) and the subsequent account of the fall (3:1-24) the punishment allotted to Eve is a subordination to Adam (3:16). Trible cautions readers of the Bible to note that the punishment allotted to Eve is precisely that: a punishment for sin, not an expression of the situation which ought to be. In sections of the Scriptures which speak of the return to Paradise as a metaphor, the condition which ought to prevail in creation, such as in the Song of Songs, women and men are presented as equal to each other, in a relationship of mutuality.¹⁰

New Testament passages affirm that the punishment imposed upon women (and men) in

Genesis for the sin of Adam and Eve is overcome in Christ (e.g. Rom 5:12-21). The present process of redemption is the working out of that promise of unity in Christ. Christ is the bringer of a new humanity, not simply a renewed male humanity with females trailing respectfully at a submissive distance. The only appropriate ethical question for a Christian, thus, is *how* does one move the world closer towards that condition of perfect equality and unity in Christ?

The fundamental assumption is that Christ is the inclusive new human, not that old Adam-male is renewed in the new Christ-male. When Paul speaks of Christ as the new Adam, it may be obvious to some that he includes Eve and all other women, but such inclusion has usually not been obvious in the Christian tradition. A contemporary reconstruction of Christian anthropology demands a far more inclusive reformulation of that notion.

Incidentally, one might suggest that we need a renewed appreciation of Eve. The Eastern churches have retained a far livelier sense of Eve and Adam both as the ancestors of humanity, both sinning and both receiving redemption from Christ who came to deliver them from hell where they awaited him. Western Christians don't pray to either St. Eve or St. Adam, and perhaps they have

¹⁰Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 17-33.

lost something. Even if one asserts that neither Eve nor Adam is a historical character, a point well taken in the strict sense, it may be useful to give some recognition to these biblical figures. At some point in time, some humanoids began to be humanly conscious. Why not remember them poetically as Adam and Eve? It might even serve as a spur for anthropologists, who are notorious for their neglect of women in considering the first "man."

But if we remember Adam and Eve as the first humans, our ancestors, in Christ we acclaim the new human, the one who redeems Adam and Eve. The New Testament does not recognize one redeemer for Adam and another for Eve; one redeemer saves both, and one model empowers the new humanity.¹¹ Christ is not redeemer because he is a male person, but as one who is inclusive in his own consciousness of himself and his attitude towards others he overcomes the stereotypical social and religious notions about masculine and feminine. Numerous studies have shown that the biblical record represents Jesus as applying to himself both culturally interpreted feminine attributes and feminine aspects of God in the Hebrew Bible. This assessment must be combined with the well-explored notion that Jesus, within the context of his culture, treated women as equal with men.¹² The image of Jesus Christ as inclusive, appropriating human characteristics we associate with each of the sexes, and not treating people according to male/female divisions, indicates that the writers of Scripture, and presumably Jesus himself, understood Jesus' redemptive mission as including females and males.

Consequently the model of the new humanity he manifests is inclusive. In Jesus the Adam-Eve dichotomy, the subordinate relationship introduced by sin, is overcome, and Jesus manifests in his person human wholeness not limited by sex. Some writers have made a strong case that the initial favorable reaction of so many women to Jesus was because they perceived in him a liberator from sexual stereotypes, who offered to them the possibility of a new and redeemed humanity.¹³

Because Christians recognize Christ as the new humanity, we must acknowledge our common failure to achieve new humanity as we ought to have. Because we proclaim that we are one new humanity in Christ, we also acknowledge that we all need to be drawn together and

healed in Christ. Both female and male need to be renewed, and to conform themselves to the one Christ. Women are not exempt from evil inclinations within, nor from the deeds which spring from those tendencies, any more than men are. Although there may be certain evils which in our societies are more characteristic of women than men, and men may be far more overtly oppressive than women, neither is innocent. Each must

¹¹The roots of this unacceptable position among the church fathers are found in Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (New York: Newman, 1952) 68-69. The theological consequences of such a position involve the necessity of two redeemers, Mary and Christ, each responsible for redemption of half of the human race. I am indebted to Dr. Elizabeth Bettenhausen of Boston University for aid in clarifying some of these aspects of Christ as the new Adam.

¹²E.g., Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, *Jesus According to a Woman* (New York: Paulist, 1975); Wahlberg, *Jesus and the Freed Woman* (New York: Paulist, 1978).

¹³Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 46-47.

look to the one Christ for healing, though perhaps in recognition of historically produced tendencies women need to be encouraged to look more to Christ's royal service, and males to the self-sacrificing servant. Nonetheless, just as humanity is united in its creation, so it is in sinfulness and in redemption.

Theologically it is absolutely essential in the Christian community that we express the unity of humanity in its creation, its sinfulness, and its redemption. Of course it is important that our theological anthropology acknowledge different human capacities, the complexity of the many variables that are part of the human person and human activities. But contemporary feminism underlines for us again the importance of an analysis of the human condition which can express and explain essential human commonality, the unity of the human condition, the oneness in Christ, in whom all the dividing walls are broken down.

Such a theological assertion has profound ramifications for ethics. The unity of the human race expressed in Christ, who is the new Adam-Eve, necessitates that all judgments about values must be made in light of their effects on the whole of the human condition. (A thorough treatment of the issue would also take account of the global and cosmic dimensions of wholeness.) If our fundamental relationship is unity, equality, a belonging together in Christ, then all values and decisions which are made have to respect the whole. Such decision-making involves balancing and weighing many factors which respect individual diversity, but also the complex interweaving of our relationships on their various levels. Consequently, any decision which particularizes, which divides, in any way which damages the integrity of the unity of humanity, is wrong.

For instance, just as it is wrong to pay lower wages to blacks because of their race, so it is to do so to women. As Margaret Fuller pointed out in the nineteenth century, it is morally wrong to do anything which artificially restricts the capabilities or the expression of those abilities, of any person, male or female, Red, Black, Yellow, or White, because to do so is to distort and limit the health of the whole human community. At the same time, individuals and communities must make their decisions with a view to maximizing the good of the community in the light of their individual capabilities. So, for instance, a wife or husband is not free simply to move whenever career possibilities bid, but the effects on the family unity must be sensitively balanced before the risks are taken. On a broader plane, the need for arming a nation must be balanced not only by issues of the balance of power among nations, and the general effect on the "arms race,"

but also in light of effects on the economy and social stability of the nations involved, and eventually of the world. Although it seems that ethical decisions are made more complex (and on one level they are), at the same time such searching also insures a greater attention to the unity and interrelationship of the whole human community in Christ.

One of the most significant contributions that feminist theology could make to ethics is a renewed sense of the common good, the notion that all human decisions made must attend not only to the individual or even one community, but to the good of the whole. Even though it is never possible to know precisely what the common good is, because the notion of the common good in this life is an essentially eschatological notion which moves us towards what ought to be, we can still aim towards the good of the whole. In the overcoming of divisions

wrought through sin, including those based on sex, and in the striving to unite all more closely together as one mutually loving community in Christ, repression will decline as the possibilities of each in the whole are actualized.

IV. VALUES OF THE NEW EMPHASIS ON WHOLENESS

Theologically the impetus of feminism of both the reformist and revolutionary sort encourages us to a renewed understanding of God and Christ. One of the great services of feminism or any other movement which raises fundamental questions is to make us attend to questions and issues which we ought to have been responding to but have been neglecting. Feminism forces the Christian community to reassess popular notions of humanity and its relationship to God which had been produced by a culture which simply had not dealt with some of its prejudiced presuppositions. Feminism requires us to reconsider the patriarchal imagery present in the minds of those who wrote Scripture and most of its interpretation, and to rethink fundamental notions with a more humanly inclusive base.

Radical feminism forces us to recognize that our culture has created a divisive notion of the human; radicals have simply turned it upside-down to exclude those who excluded them for so long. Christian feminists are attending to a comprehensive and inclusive notion of the human which recognizes the many variables in the constitution of the person, including gender, but which insists that the most fundamental reality is the unity of humanity in creation, the alienation we call sin, and our redemption in Christ.

Such unity—as one whole in Christ—has very specific ethical consequences which the Christian community is just beginning to face. If we are one living community in Christ, then all decisions need to be made with that global unity in mind. There is no private sphere and public morality, no strict Christian personal ethics alongside the pragmatic necessities of national and international relations. Every human decision, from the most hidden to the highest level of international diplomacy, is in fact being made within the context of the unity of the human, indeed, the cosmic, community. The role of feminist ethics is to elucidate the true context of the decisions we make, and aid us in responsible grappling with the interrelatedness of all we do.

Does the feminist vision of Christian anthropology, and the ethics which springs from it, look more complicated than a prefeminist approach? Yes, no doubt. Is this approach truer to the biblical vision of the whole, the scope of the universal redemption offered to all in Christ, in whom God will be “all in all”? Yes, unquestionably. Not only does feminism contribute to the recognition of the full humanity of women, but it illumines and strengthens an essential dimension of a fully biblical faith.