



Theology, Gender, and Individualism in America

ANN TAVES

School of Theology at Claremont, Claremont, California

In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah and his co-authors call upon Americans, at least white middle class Americans, to move beyond their obsession with autonomous individualism to a “level of social integration” in which the old dualisms of individualism and community, autonomy and dependence are overcome.¹ They recognize, following Alexis de Tocqueville, that while religion in America has often been called upon to protect us from our individualistic impulses, it too has been rent by splits between religious individualists and more authoritarian church-oriented traditionalists. The authors argue that both church people and religious individualists need something of what the other has got and conclude that

a vital and enduring religious individualism can only survive in a renewed relationship with established religious bodies. Such a renewed relationship would require changes on both sides. Churches and sects would have to learn that they can sustain more autonomy than they had thought, and religious individualists would have to learn that solitude without community is merely loneliness.²

They also recognize, again following de Tocqueville, that the role that women have played historically in the church and in the family has been central to the maintenance of the communal “habits of the heart” which they value so highly.

Religion, [de Tocqueville] says, “does direct mores, and by regulating domestic life it helps to regulate the state.” The rigor of American mores derives from religion, but not directly through its influence on men. In America,

¹Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985) 286. For a critique of the white, middle class biases of this book, see Vincent Harding, “Toward a Darkly Radiant Vision of America’s Truth,” *Cross Currents* 37 (1987) 1-16.

²R. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 247-48.

“religion is often powerless to restrain men in the midst of innumerable temptations which fortune offers. It cannot moderate their eagerness to enrich themselves, which everything contributes to arouse, but it reigns supreme in the souls of the women, and it is women who shape mores.”³

De Tocqueville thus argued that pious women shape the habits of their children’s hearts

through their involvement in the domestic sphere and in so doing indirectly restrain the individualistic tendencies of men in the political sphere. In pointing out that the individualistic “ethic of achievement articulated by men was sustained by a moral ecology *shaped by women*,”⁴ the authors imply that at least historically it was *male* not female individualism that was excessive. In noting that these ideas are “still very much in the minds of contemporary Americans, and [that] the contrast between [the two spheres] is one of the most important ways in which we organize our world,”⁵ the authors suggest that even today we are dealing with an issue around which there are deep seated gender differences.⁶ In fact, much contemporary feminist literature, both religious and secular, reflects women’s struggles to find ways to assert their own individualism and autonomy in the midst of their traditional dependence on and concern for others.⁷

Although the authors of *Habits of the Heart* do mention gender differences on several occasions and give such differences more extended treatment in their chapter on love and marriage, they do not really explore the implications of those differences for their critique of middle class white America. Their gender analysis, while present, is superficial and does not cut to the core of their argument. Nor in their concern to illustrate the value of the social sciences as a form of public philosophy do they spend much time discussing theology *per se* and the way that it has fostered or undermined the dualisms they find problematic.

Despite these limitations the authors do set up an interesting problem and suggest a promising line of inquiry in their call for a reconstituted “social ecology.” Any such reconstitution of white middle class American life requires a deepened awareness of the way that its “social ecology” has been constituted historically. Such an awareness cannot be based simply on an analysis of the relationship between generic “individuals” and the national “community,” but must be grounded in an awareness of the particularities of race, class, and gender which shape not only individual lives, but the way that individuals and groups participate in the common life of the nation. Similarly, Christian theologies cannot be treated as disembodied ideas waiting to be reclaimed; rather, they must be examined as the speculations of particular persons or

³Ibid.,86.

⁴Ibid., 40.

⁵Ibid.,87.

⁶The tendency of women to emphasize relationality over autonomy with respect to gender roles, moral decision making, and learning has been discussed by Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley: University of California, 1978); Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1982); and Mary F. Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

⁷See, for example, Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Mary Daly, *Pure Lust* (Boston: Beacon, 1984) 317-417; Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon, 1985) 202-10; Rosemary Ruether, *Women-Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); and Carol Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 27-33.

groups in particular situations about the nature of and proper relationship between God, Jesus, humanity, and the natural world. Theological ideas both shape and are shaped by the contexts in which they are formulated. They are thus an integral part of any social ecology.

To get at the role which theology has played in the social ecology of the dominant

culture⁸ at the point when de Tocqueville was writing, and thus indirectly at least to raise some issues for contemporary theologians, I shall examine the image of Christ which emerged during the early nineteenth century and which dominated popular Protestantism until well into the twentieth century. I want to suggest that this conception of Jesus was shaped by the very dualisms that the authors of *Habits of the Heart* decry and, further, that any attempt to renew relationships between religious individualists—including many, if not most, religious feminists—and the churches will need to take seriously the complex social ecologies within which theologies are developed and take on meaning. More specifically, given our history, such theologies will need to take into account the asymmetrical impact of orthodox forms of Christian theology on men and women.

A number of scholars have discussed the Puritans' elaboration of the biblical "bride of Christ" metaphor to describe the conversion process and thus the nature of the relationship between the believer and Christ.⁹ By the middle decades of the nineteenth century the very sensual male image of Christ as lover and husband had been eclipsed by a de-eroticized and, in terms of cultural stereotypes, rather maternal, image of Christ as self-sacrificing friend.

In a recent study of Christ imagery in nineteenth-century hymns, Mary De Jong found that although the image of Christ as lover persisted into the nineteenth century, Victorian hymn writers frequently changed the words of older hymns in order to downplay the erotic character of the relationship between Jesus and the believer. The most popular new hymns tended to describe "the believer's bond with Christ...in terms of friendship or kinship, metaphors of relations apparently untroubled by sex or gender."¹⁰ According to De Jong,

The composite Christ who can be found in Victorian hymnbooks had considerable but not unlimited resources. He was more often associated with sympathy and "influence" (a term generally assigned to woman's sphere) than with overt power (man's prerogative). The majority of nineteenth-century hymns presented him as a selfless, supporting being who participated in humankind's physical and emotional experience....His strength consisted mainly in his capacity for fellow-feeling and commitment to extending his offer of grace to all.¹¹

⁸I am referring here to that segment of the culture which was shaped primarily by a Protestantism of British derivation and which maintained its cultural hegemony until into the early twentieth century. See Robert Handy, *A Christian America* (2nd ed.; New York: Oxford University, 1984).

⁹Margaret W. Masson, "The Typology of the Female as a Model for the Regenerate: Puritan Preaching, 1690-1730," *Signs* 2 (1976) 304-15; Amanda Porterfield, *Feminine Spirituality in America: From Sarah Edwards to Martha Graham* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1980) 19-50; David Leverenz, *The Language of Puritan Feeling* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1980).

¹⁰Mary De Jong, "'I want to be like Jesus': The Self-Defining Power of Evangelical Hymnody," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986) 464-69; see also Sandra Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1978) 40; and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Avon, 1978).

¹¹M. De Jong, "Evangelical Hymnody," 482-83.

While Puritans cast Jesus as an erotic husband and converts as passive, but fulfilled, wives, nineteenth-century evangelicals cast Jesus as a selfless, nurturing, implicitly maternal

source of solace, and converts as lovable, but dependent. Casting Jesus in the role of husband required a metaphoric gender reversal on the part of those Puritan men who underwent conversion, while casting Jesus in an implicitly maternal role required a metaphoric regression to childhood for both male and female evangelicals. Conversion, in other words, was not a mutual interchange between two equal parties; it was a hierarchical transaction in which the divine participants held the power.

Although both Puritans and nineteenth-century evangelicals assumed that the source of human empowerment lay outside the self and that true power could be obtained only by submission and obedience to Christ or God, the way Jesus' power was understood shifted markedly with the change in imagery. As a colonial husband, Jesus could be both seductive and authoritarian. As a Victorian mother, Jesus lost both his eroticism and his authority; his power vis-à-vis converts lay in his ability to withhold sustenance and comfort from those who did not submit and obey.

In the colonial context where patriarchal authority was relatively secure, conversion (understood as submission to Christ as husband) reinforced the dominant role expectations for women, while overturning or reversing the dominant expectations for men.¹² During the Revolutionary and early national periods, a variety of factors—including the Enlightenment, the urbanization of the population, and the rise of wage labor—undermined the traditional patriarchal conception of the social order and led to a partial recasting of gender roles in light of the perceived needs of the new nation.¹³

During the same period the churches were disestablished and entered the “voluntary sector.” Assuming with disestablishment that the foundations of morality must be laid in the family, and presupposing women's domestic influence on men, women's obligation to rear children, and the malleability of infant character, clergy began to look upon women in their capacity as wives and mothers as the bedrock on which both Protestant voluntarism and the republican experiment depended.¹⁴ Women, as well as clergy, participated in this recasting of beliefs about the roles of women and religion, and specifically the role of the religious mother, in the life of the nation.

Catherine Beecher, daughter of Lyman Beecher, a prominent New England clergyman, was one of the architects of the ideology of separate spheres. She assumed, consistent with her Puritan heritage and in opposition to early women's rights advocates such as Angelina and Sarah Grimke, that superior and subordinate relationships were necessary in a stable society. She argued that women should voluntarily subordinate themselves to their husbands and entrust their civil and political rights “to the other sex, without...taking any part in voting, or in making and administering laws.” In matters pertaining to “the education of their children, in the selection and support of clergy men, in

¹²Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University, 1980) 8-9, 185; and D. Leverenz, *The Language of Puritan Feeling*, 144.

¹³Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: Woman's Sphere in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977) 203.

¹⁴Ibid.

all benevolent enterprises, and in questions relating to morals or manners, they have a superior *influence*.”¹⁵ Emphasizing the same virtues in the domestic sphere that would come to be associated with Jesus, Beecher granted to women, by virtue of their maternal role and pious nature, “the exalted privilege of extending over the world those blessed influences [of Christianity] that are to renovate degraded man.”¹⁶

The premise underlying evangelical enthusiasm for separate spheres was articulated by de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, a book which Catherine Beecher lavishly praised and frequently quoted:

Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is much more necessary in the republic...than in the monarchy; it is more needed in democratic republics than in any others. How is it possible that society should escape destruction if the moral tie is relaxed? And what can be done with a people who are their own masters if they are not submissive to the Deity?¹⁷

Evangelicals, following de Tocqueville and in keeping with much of the Christian tradition, assumed that society would disintegrate if human desires for autonomy and individualism were left unchecked by the moral imperative of submission to a higher authority whether human or divine.

Consciously or unconsciously, evangelicals reacted to the increasing autonomy and individualism of adult men in the political realm by identifying the family as the place where traditional virtues such as submission to authority and self-sacrifice could be maintained *and* serve as a check on the autonomous and “selfish” impulses unleashed in men in the public realm. The result was a polarization of male and female social roles which associated the virtues of submission, obedience, nurture, and relationality with Jesus and with women, especially in their roles as mothers, daughters, and wives and the virtues of independence, autonomy, and individualism with adult men, especially in their role as informed voting citizens and economic entrepreneurs.

The shift from husband/lover to maternal/friend imagery thus reflected the clergy’s loss of authority, their alliance with women, and the increasingly *influential* role which both women and clergy hoped to play in the new republic. By helping to create, and then modeling themselves on, a new understanding of Christ, evangelical women were able to expand their influence on American life dramatically.¹⁸

For all but the most radical nineteenth-century women, participation in the public realm was understood not as a right, but as a duty imposed upon women only insofar as they derived their power and sense of self-worth from the imitation of Jesus’ self-sacrificial love. In embracing the piety of self-sacrifice and the rhetoric of “social homemaking” or “home protection” as the basis for their expanded participation in public life, women disavowed any desire for authority based on their *right* to equality and grounded their power

¹⁵Catherine Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841) 4, 7 (emphasis added).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (1834-40; repr. ed., 2 vol.; New York: Vintage, 1945)

in their ability to influence others.¹⁹ While more “manly” virtues of Christ as soldier, king, and even businessman were articulated during the latter part of the century,²⁰ christologies, like the dominant culture more generally, remained polarized into recognizably “masculine” (i.e., autonomous) and “feminine” (i.e., relational) forms.

Feminists have been criticizing the ideal of self-sacrificial love in light of its implications for women since the late nineteenth century.²¹ Responding to the critiques made by Mary Daly and others, Sharon Welch has argued that “the meaning of the sacrificial love of Jesus is not exhausted by its internal logic or its coherence with the historically available words of Jesus, but includes the social effect of this symbol in the lives of women.”²²

Any reconstitution of our “social ecology” must therefore be grounded, first, in a recognition of the role which theology has played in both the constitution and change of the social order and second, in a recognition of the fact that various doctrines have had non-symmetrical “social effects” on different groups within our society. In a period of transition with respect to gender roles, it should not be surprising that men and women respond to the same christologies in different ways or that, given these problems, many Christian feminists have difficulty thinking about christology at all. From a religious studies point of view, a high percentage of feminists are religious. Many, however, would describe *themselves* as having abandoned “religion,” by which they mean the church, in order to embrace “spirituality.” The burgeoning interest in goddess-oriented or New Age spiritualities as well as the creation of “exodus communities” or “communities of resistance” within the church suggests an increasing degree of religious individualism (and creativity) among feminists.²³ Given the social effects of central Christian doctrines on the lives of women, I think that this religious individualism ought not to be disparaged. Indeed it should be encouraged and used by Christian theologians as a basis for rethinking Christian doctrines in a time when we can no longer afford central symbols which perpetuate old dualisms, such as relationality and autonomy, rather than holding them in creative tension.

¹⁹Ann Taves, “Mothers and Children and the Legacy of Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Christianity,” *Journal of Religion* 67 (1987) 203-19.

²⁰M. De Jong, “Evangelical Hymnody,” 475-78.

²¹Nineteenth-century critics are cited in Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, “Agape in Feminist Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9 (1981) 69-83; for twentieth-century criticism, see Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) 77; and idem, *Gyn/Ecology* (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 377-78; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace* (Washington: University Press of America, 1980); and Susan Dunfee, “Christianity and the Liberation of Women” (Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, 1985).

²²Sharon Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity: A Feminist Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985) 16.

²³On the former, see Starhawk, *Dreaming the Dark* (Boston: Beacon, 1982); C. Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite*; Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods* (Boston: Beacon, 1979); on the latter, see R. Ruether, *Women-Church*, 57-74; and S. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*.