



Lutheran Women towards 2000

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The scene was a Lutheran country church. The time was 1987. The occasion was a conference for women and only a few men were present in the congregation. The speaker was a woman who spoke of how our patriarchal tradition has made men aggressive and women timid. Her speech was followed by a worship service that began with a confession of sins. The words had an electrifying effect:

O Lord, I confess before you that I have not believed in my own possibilities, but by thoughts, words and deeds I have belittled myself and my capacities.

I have not loved myself as much as others. I have not loved my body, my looks, my gifts, my very own way of being.

I have let others govern my life; I have allowed myself to be disregarded and abused.

I have believed the judgments of others more than my own.

I have allowed people to be disrespectful and spiteful toward me without daring to tell them to stop and desist.

I confess that I have not dared to aim at my full potential. Cowardly, I have avoided a fight when my case was just. I have bowed out in order to avoid trouble.

I confess that I have not dared to be as capable as I can be.

O God, father and creator,

O Jesus, brother and savior,

O Spirit, mother and comforter,

forgive me for despising myself.

Restore me, make me trust myself, give me the true love of self.¹

Since then this "Confession for the Timid" has been read and spoken by hundreds of women at meetings and conferences, and women have responded to it with a ringing "Amen." And many cry. Here they encounter a corrective to that confession

¹Confession prepared by Rev. Lena Malmström, Uppsala, Sweden.

of sins which all their lives has made them feel deficient and inferior. Maybe they have confessed the wrong sins. The perspective which sees themselves as having talents is immensely liberating.

I. THE EFFECTS OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

I have been asked to write about what I think Lutheran women will do in the last decade of this millennium and I have been thinking about it. Nobody can tell the future—anything can happen—and the conditions for Lutheran women are so different in the West from the East, in the South from the North.² But rather than stressing the differences, I would like to reflect on some common trends.

At the end of the decade there will still be groups like the “Ladies Aid” or the “Women of the Church” who do the cooking, feeding, and cleaning; who teach Sunday School, sing in the choir, sort the clothing, and ship it off. The women will be there because the church needs people to do these things and women are easier to get hold of. Although many of them are professional women, they are used to carrying a double workload and think nothing of taking on an additional task.

This does not imply that the many recent studies of patriarchy’s devastating impact on the status of women over the ages has not made a dent in women’s consciousness. It has been quite shocking for Lutherans to realize how the church’s hierarchy and its liturgy have both reflected and reinforced an image of women as inferior. No matter how hard the churches today try to amend past abuses and implement inclusive language, some women will break away. The memories of oppression are suffocating. The hurt goes too deep.³

Other women, though, are encouraged by the churches’ readiness to involve them, send them to conferences, elect them chairs of church councils, employ them, welcome them to seminaries, receive them as teachers, call them as pastors, and listen to their first groping attempts to express what they see as important. Progress, progress, these women think, and refuse to dwell on past crimes and present misdemeanors. It will not be long before men and women are full partners. True, there is not yet a sign of a Lutheran woman bishop, but it cannot be long now.⁴ The more there is resistance the more the ranks of support for women swell.

II. “WHAT IS HAPPENING TO US?”

This decade is not going to be easy, wherever we live on this earth. Overpopulation and unemployment, poverty and famine will cause people to move from South to North, from East to West. We are about to witness an epoch of

²The magazine *The Lutheran*, published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, reports often in its news section on happenings around the world and the work of the Lutheran World Federation. However, events are seldom seen from the women’s point of view.

³An extreme example is Mary Daly, who in her books —e.g., *The Church and the Second Sex*, *Beyond God the Father*, and *Gyn/Ecology*—has turned her hurt and disappointment with the Catholic church into creative feminist theology. Many Lutheran women have found a new home in a Women’s Church. An instructive exercise is to compare the two volumes of essays on patterns in feminist spirituality, selected and edited with a ten-year interval by Judith Plaskow and Carol P. Christ, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* and *Weaving Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979 and 1989).

⁴Sweden, which ordained its first women priests in 1960, now has a woman *domprost* (dean of the cathedral), a post next in line to the bishopric.

migration on a worldwide scale. When the social fabric rips apart, women and children suffer the most.⁵

Even the once-prosperous West is in deep economic trouble. The United States is in debt and its citizens suffer from homelessness, from deleterious education, from lack of a decent health program, and from too much armament and too little leadership.

President George Bush, in his call for “a thousand points of light,” is aiming in particular at church people. We are the ones to be helpful and gentle and kind as in the past. We should quietly pick up the slack with shelters for the homeless, soup kitchens for the hungry, daycare for the elderly, transportation for the mentally disturbed, and housing for battered women and abused children. He is right that the church has a long tradition in caring for the disadvantaged. But something has happened to society in the last half century. Church social service institutions have been either taken over and enlarged by the state (as in the Scandinavian welfare-state model that has spread over Europe) or have come to share the responsibilities for the poor and the sick with the civil authorities. Now these institutions are all broke. To repair what has fallen apart takes massive communal effort. What is needed is a thorough reconstruction, not band-aid projects. What is required is creativity, empathy, and drive to start pilot projects and use the experience in planning long-range projects.

In the past, however, the majority of committee members on high-powered policy and budget boards have been men. Women as a rule have not asked to be included, partly because they already have too much to do, and partly because they know from experience how hard it is to get a word in edgewise when men debate. In the future that will change. Now both men and women are aware that in those committees the blueprints are drawn for the future of our children. Men and women must cooperate and draw on each other’s experiences for this kind of long-range planning. The churches must urge their people to participate on local, state, and federal levels in the design of the future. Lutherans cannot excuse themselves by reference to Luther’s teaching of the two kingdoms. Luther never guessed that the church would ever abdicate its duty to persuade, warn, and admonish the secular powers to care for all people and let justice reign in the land.

Lutheran women are, on the whole, well-educated and equipped to take an active part in the policies that are shaping the world for the next millennium. In the preceding decades many women have learned how to take responsibility for their own lives; their choice or change of profession, their choice or change of spouse, and their house and home and children. In the coming decade they will participate in decisions which go beyond their immediate, individual concerns to decisions seeking to preserve and protect all life that is now in danger of extinction.

The industrial and technological revolutions happened to women, who more or less had to adapt to the changes. They took the lower-paid, routine jobs in order

⁵Reports published in newspapers, in church magazines, and in TV programs stress how in economic recession women are the first to be laid off; how jobless men in their frustration sometimes sexually abuse and violate women and children; how in the spread of military bases the promotion of sex-tourism prostitution increases, involving ever-younger women and children; and how nuclear testing victimizes women, who suffer miscarriages and give birth to deformed children. And the list goes on.

to increase the family income. But women are no longer allowed to be passive. No longer can women say: What will happen to us?⁶

III. THE WOMEN'S DECADE

In 1975 the United Nations proclaimed the following ten years a decade for women. It was a unique moment, a world-wide organization focusing on the status of women. Study after study had shown that those hardest hit by poverty, migration, war, and government instability were women and children. When the import of these statistics became overwhelming, the UN proclaimed its decade for women and then followed it with a decade for children, 1985-95.

The World Council of Churches has followed the UN's example by heralding the years 1988-98 an "ecumenical decade of churches in solidarity with women." A growing number of women now have leadership positions in the WCC, and membership on its committees is obliged to have an equal number of men and women. By its commitment to the sharing of power and its focus on the status of women, the WCC has given women space and time to concentrate on their own agenda.

The WCC's theme for its recent assembly in Canberra, Australia: "Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation," fits hand in glove with that women's agenda. There is an increasing anxiety about the growing gap between poor and rich nations, between the black and white races, between rich and poor classes, between rich and poor individuals. Instead of a reasonable trust, an unreasoning fear is spreading around the world. Only with a huge measure of justice and with conscious efforts to correct the imbalance can peace ever be obtained. Many women have said privately to each other: I would do anything, sacrifice my life, retire my car, live in complete poverty, anything—if only I knew that I contributed to real peace, if only I could accomplish some measure of security for my children's future.

Now is the time for those sacrifices. We all know it. But who will do it? Who will begin? Where are the women who will work for good causes because they realize that what is at stake is survival, not just of men, women, and children, but of animals and plants, the whole Noah's ark, all living things aboard spaceship Earth? The churches have a huge responsibility not merely to speak up but to work out.

IV. THE TROJAN HORSE

"Ethics is our Trojan horse," wrote a British theologian recently.⁷ He argued that Christian theology is so involved that it is impossible for the uninitiated to comprehend. Ordinary people feel hostile and put upon by the old-fashioned, and now for them meaningless, language. But Christian ethics gets into the enemy's camp. The commandments asking people to sacrifice their pleasure and convenience for the sake of others will always be a center for curiosity. What's inside this bulky horse? Does it work?

⁶The Lutheran World Federation held a women's consultation in preparation for its Eighth Assembly in Curitiba, Brazil in 1990. Lutheran women from all over the world worked out a report, *Open Our Eyes*, that is relevant for the future. The director for the LWF's women's section is Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro of Kenya.

⁷Don Cupitt, *Radicals and the Future of the Church* (London: SCM, 1989).

It is up to us to come out of our Lutheran camouflage and do good works. We do not have to boast over them (though the apostle Paul never seemed hesitant about bragging). But we will do them because we are instructed, charged, directed, and commanded to do so. To put it kindergarten simple: The imitation of Christ, to follow Jesus, is to care and to share.

V. A SHIFT IN THEOLOGY

When women pastors preach, the emphasis is often on caring, on nurturing, on noticing the world around us. For some, this emphasis has represented a shift of theological attention from the Father in heaven down to *earth*, this mythical and mystical mother Earth who sustains us. To reflect on this point theologically is to understand exploitation as a deadly sin; it is to feel deeply the destruction of the balance in nature as a wound in the body. When we realize our interdependence on this earth and dream of a mended creation, we long for healing. Christ's mission is seen in that light. He came to heal and mend what was wounded and broken.

"Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation," the prayer theme for the WCC Assembly in Canberra this year, is indicative of a theological shift toward a more trinitarian understanding of God, in which the Spirit is given appropriate attention and worship. Without hammering on dogma, new light is reflected in the old creed.⁸

VI. ECUMENISM

I can hear somebody ask: Are you not writing too much about the WCC and concentrating too little on your Lutheran sisters? I am not sure. What does "Lutheran" mean for women who belong to the Lutheran church? Not much. Most were born into it as a family tradition, as our roots. But since Lutheran women until recently have been those trained to serve at tables instead of to sit down and debate Lutheran dogma, the matter for women is of unequal importance. Martin Luther was a man, definitely worth study but not worship. The Augsburg Confession is a historic document in need of interpretation, not deification. Lutheran women who have studied literature and history in college and those women who come fresh out of seminaries can find much in Lutheran history to stir their imagination, but, being unfettered by the long and quarrelsome tradition of orthodoxy and pietism, they are free to choose their own new angles on old themes and to ignore the most tiresome Lutheran bones of contention—e.g., the teaching of the two kingdoms or of the total depravity of humankind.

It is much easier for women to have dialogue with people from other denominations and together with them celebrate what we have in common. Women can leapfrog over old doctrinal obstacles and come down where the challenges are today. Lutheran women can join gladly with Catholics, Baptists, and plain secular folks in statements and actions promoting justice, peace, and the integrity of creation. We do not feel it necessary to have a special Lutheran action. The Catholic bishops in the United States, for example, have a huge following of women far outside of their own flocks when they express their views concerning war and the

⁸The booklet *Energy for Life*, written by Krister Stendahl for the WCC's 1991 Assembly, is a Bible meditation that illuminates the role of the Spirit in the Trinity.

economy.⁹ But sadly, they have not seemed very discerning when it comes to women.

It is fortunate for women to have arrived at the ecumenical dialogues just at the time when science and theology, two that for centuries have bitterly opposed each other, have come to regard each other with a certain closer respect. In some cases, the perspectives of women can help to distinguish between old biased baggage and actual realities. A recent Swedish sociological study, for instance, displayed a disparity between men and women concerning their attitudes toward the statement that human beings consist only of body and matter, i.e., what some

scientists have claimed a long while.¹⁰ Thirty percent of the men in the study and nine percent of the women were in complete agreement with the statement; partial agreement: 30% men and 21% women; disagreement (!): 70% women and 40% men. How is it that women to such a high degree resist such a materialist perspective?

It is a misinterpretation to think that secular folk and people on the fringes of church membership do not form belief systems of their own. The sociological study just cited concludes that the general drift in belief systems is neither theocentric nor anthropocentric but *biocentric*. Biocentric views are likely to be dismissed as confused or naive by professional theologians, but the author of the study, a professional theologian, thinks that we might have something to learn from what he calls “common life philosophies.” I would add that articulate women have acted and do act as bridge builders between the languages of the church and of common life. It is no accident that, while theologians are giving greater attention to the mending of the creation, people of common life philosophy are giving voice to a biocentric worldview. Although our belief systems are different, we are synchronously on parallel tracks. We are often united, for instance, on practical issues such as the importance of conservation and recycling.

Currently, there is an allergic reaction to anthropomorphic images which has reached epidemic heights. The rash may not last long, however. We need our stories—all those wonderful narratives that children can grasp, and then remember and come to understand in new ways all through their lives. The animals who speak, the flowers, the stars, the moon, even death—they are our brothers and sisters according to St. Francis. We have a lot to learn about our mother nature.

Fundamentalists of whatever stripe do not agree; they want women to be silent in the congregation. They want no new ideas about revelation and no fancy notions about a new ethic for the biological age. However, we who have lived through the women’s revolution up to the point where, finally, the church admitted women to the ministry remember the first timid and uncertain beginnings, and we rejoice in the progress we have seen. Leadership and authority seem now to come naturally. The Bible, too, in the hands of these women, reveals new and sometimes stunning perspectives on old, familiar texts.¹¹

⁹See the United States Catholic Bishops’ letter on war and peace, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (1983), and their pastoral letter on *Catholic Social Teaching and the US Economy* (1984).

¹⁰Carl Reinhold Bråkenhielm, *Constructive Theology and the Study of Popular Life-Philosophies*, *Theologica*, no. 4 (Uppsala, Sweden, 1990). Forthcoming.

¹¹We members of University Lutheran Church, Cambridge, Massachusetts, have had the fortune to listen to and be enriched by three women pastors in succession: Constance F. Parvey, Jessica Crist, and Susan P. Thomas. From personal experience we can witness to the renewal they have brought to the church.

VII. THE PAIN OF THE SOUL

During World War II people spoke of an age of anxiety. A huge cloud of uncertainty hung over people’s minds. In a similar fashion people have begun to speak of the 1990s as the age of depression. Hopes are dashed. The better life—at least far better than that of parents and grandparents—never seems to materialize. In fact, life is getting worse, and more and more people have difficulties handling their anger and frustration at constant disappointments and lack of reward. They see only darkness at the end of the tunnel.

Nowadays, people seldom go to their pastor when life is bearing down on them. They

look up a psychiatrist, or they take drugs that will relieve their pain. Many are afraid that the pastor will dismiss their depression as lack of faith. But faith in what? I am the one blocking myself from salvation. Someone has summarized: Depression is when an intelligent person stops denying. We have legions of depressed men and women right in our churches as well as outside of them. The remedy is not to get them on a seesaw, up on hope, down on despair. That will not get rid of the depression; nothing will. Learning to live, and to live creatively and even theologically with one's depression, discovering one's own consciousness, that is what Luther did. He plumbed the depths of his soul and spirit, and it was in this ultimate impoverished state that he found strength and became the Luther he was. The church, on the other hand, often has an unfortunate upbeat style which insists we are doing pretty good. In this way we deny what was essential to Luther. Depression is integral to the tragic sense of life: "The true revolution begins in the individual who can be true to his or her depression."¹²

Simone Weil, who lived during World War II and the Holocaust, experienced deep depression. She took refuge in it and focused on its gravity and grace. During recent years similarly powerful works written by women have appeared. These works of poetry and art have grown out of utter powerlessness. They have risen out of the shadows in the valley of death and are works of intense theological heat. To get through the 1990s, many will need guidance in the netherworld and will need to feel its fever to save their souls.¹³

So we are back to Luther and to his deepest insights. Lutheran women might discover him not as a kind of "founding father" whose constitution we must obey, but as a guide, a therapist, who can relieve the pressure and release the creative impulse in us. There is strength in a powerlessness which will plant an apple tree today, even if the world is going to pieces tomorrow.¹⁴

¹²From *A Blue Fire: Selected Writings by James Hillman*, ed. Thomas Moore and James Hillman (New York: Harper & Row, 1989). Hillman is a psychologist and genius therapist who understands the possibilities buried in depression.

¹³See Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la Grace* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1948); Maria Bergom-Larsson, *Nedstigning* (Delsbo, Sweden: Åsak, Sahlin & Dahlström, 1989); and Kerstin Ekman, *Knivkastarens kvinna* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1990).

¹⁴The Luther scholar, Heiko A. Obermann, informs me that this often repeated Luther quotation is not authentic. However, he acknowledges the genuine Luther spirit in it.