



## **Feminism in Different Voices: Resources for the Church**

MARCIA BUNGE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

“Are you a feminist?” this question often arises in discussions about feminism. Yet this simple question will sabotage rather than foster discussion if it presupposes that all feminists are the same. Those who ask the question may assume that it can be answered with a “yes” or a “no” and without qualification about the kinds of feminist positions people in the discussion hold. This assumption has been a major obstacle to meaningful conversation about feminism because it ignores the diversity of feminism today. The view that feminism is a uniform, monolithic movement has also played a role in preventing the church from using the valuable resources feminism can offer.

### I. THE DIFFERENT VOICES OF FEMINISM

All feminists are not the same. Feminism today is a diverse movement that embraces a wide variety of perspectives. This variety can be seen in earlier feminist literature. The great number of recent publications by feminists, however, has brought this diversity into sharper relief. As more women express and expand their ideas and concerns, their perspectives have been refined and have taken on more distinctive characteristics. Feminists speak not in one voice, but in different, even dissonant voices.

The different voices of feminism can be heard in discussions about any topic—from politics to sexuality. Diverse feminist perspectives are especially obvious in the literature on religion and Christianity. Some feminists, such as Mary Daly, reject the Bible and Christianity altogether, believing that they subordinate women to men. These feminists claim to expose biblical passages that encourage the oppression of women. They also look for ways that Christianity “erased” women from its history, ignoring their experience and promoting violence against them. Feminists who see the Bible and the Christian tradition in this light either reject religion altogether or find spiritual inspiration in other sources, such as in their experience of nature or in goddess worship. Starhawk,

for example, turns to witchcraft as a source of inspiration, understanding it to be the last remnant of an ancient, nature-oriented worship that venerated the Goddess.<sup>1</sup>

Other feminists, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether, recognize oppressive elements in the Bible and the Christian tradition, but they do not reject Christianity. They take various feminist critiques of Christianity seriously and have done their own careful research exposing these elements. They claim, for example, that parts of the Bible do indeed subordinate women to men, that the early church marginalized women, and that several Christian theologians have written

misogynist statements. Nevertheless, these feminists do not believe the Christian message is essentially oppressive. On the contrary, they hear a powerful message expressed in the biblical texts and through the Christian tradition that speaks meaningfully to both men and women. These Christian feminists have done much, then, both to criticize oppressive elements of Christianity and to recover and reinterpret the Christian message.

Although these Christian feminists share a commitment to Christ and a critical appreciation of the Christian tradition, diversity thrives among them too. They variously define the content of the Christian message and those elements of the Christian tradition that hide it. They also offer diverse opinions on issues raised by feminists, such as language about God, liturgical language, the concept of the church, and the relation between Christian and cultural views of women. Even when they agree on certain positions, they often present different grounds for them. Lisa Cahill and Carter Heyward, for example, share certain political positions on human sexuality. Their views of sexuality, their approaches to the subject, and the grounds for their positions, however, differ radically.<sup>2</sup>

Broad resemblances are, of course, recognizable between various feminist perspectives. Feminists share, most basically, a conviction that women are fully human and are to be treated with dignity and respect.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of this conviction, all feminists take the experiences of women seriously and examine them carefully. By doing so, feminists have exposed a variety of problems that women face and have proposed creative solutions to them. Their analyses of women's experiences have led feminists to examine a vast number of areas, ranging from family and social-economic structures to ecological issues and causes of violence and war. Feminists also use common terms (such as oppression, inequality, and patriarchy) to describe the problems confronting women and terms (such as liberation, equality, and mutuality) to express their vision of a new reality for both men and women. Even though feminists do share this

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<sup>1</sup>Starhawk, "Witchcraft and Women's Culture," *Womanspirit Rising*, ed. Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York, Harper & Row, 1979) 261.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Carter Heyward, *Our Passion for Justice* (New York: Pilgrim, 1984); and Lisa Cahill, *Between the Sexes* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). See also the diverse approaches of feminists to the theme of embodiment in *Embodied Love*, ed. Paula Cooley, Sharon Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Margaret Farley argues that the most central conviction of feminists is that "women are fully human and to be valued as such." Cf. her essay, "Feminist Consciousness and the Interpretation of Scripture," *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 44. Farley also claims that this conviction embraces the principles of equality and mutuality. Although these are central principles for many feminists, they do not appear to be central for all feminists because they variously define these terms, and some intentionally avoid using them.

central conviction and, thus, work together to describe and improve the situations of women, they nevertheless offer diverse interpretations of the problems that women face and the solutions to them. They also use the familiar terms of the feminist movement in a variety of ways. Even their use of the term "feminism" varies. This diversity is inevitable, for feminist positions are variously shaped by the particular questions, concerns, experiences, traditions, and contexts that inform them. Black feminists have been especially helpful in reminding the feminist movement of this diversity. Conscious of the contrast between their perspectives and those of white

feminists, some black feminists have chosen to make this distinction clear by calling their perspective “womanist” instead of “feminist.”<sup>4</sup> The diversity of feminist perspectives does not fall along racial lines alone, however, but along the innumerable lines of all that forms us as human beings, such as culture, language, class, education, family, and friends. These innumerable influences converge in a unique way in each individual, creating a distinctive feminist voice.

In other words, there are certain “family resemblances” (to borrow a phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein) among Christian and non-Christian feminists alike. There is not, however, one rigidly limited concept of feminism. Radical differences exist within feminism’s complicated network of similarities.

## II. RESOURCES FOR THE CHURCH

Despite the existence of these differences, men and women in the church have been reluctant to recognize, study, and appreciate them. The assumption that all feminists are the same, the temptation to listen only to feminist voices inside the church, and even the attempt to categorize feminists into a certain number of groups are some of the ways that make it possible for the church to ignore the rich diversity of feminist voices.

This is unfortunate because these diverse voices can provide those of us in the church with powerful resources for deepening our knowledge of people inside and outside the church and for sharpening our own critical self-reflection. Listening to these feminist voices does not necessarily mean agreeing with them. Rather, it means understanding the concerns of those around us more thoroughly and evaluating our own convictions more carefully and honestly. This can happen in a number of ways through the recognition and study of diverse feminist voices. Let me outline two of these ways.

First, the recognition of diversity within feminism in general can prompt meaningful and open dialogue about feminism in the church. How? The awareness of diversity among feminists can remind Christians that there are a variety of feminists within the church itself. Once they become aware of this diversity, they can begin to listen more carefully to the kinds of feminist views that individual members of the church hold. Careful listening is the first step toward meaningful dialogue, in which members of the discussion can evaluate various positions and perhaps even revise their own. This kind of dialogue rarely assumes a prominent place in congregations and seminaries. Feminist issues are so volatile that discussion about them either is avoided or takes the form of

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<sup>4</sup>Alice Walker writes, “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.” See *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) xii.

heated monologues. The issues do, however, affect the church, and members of the church should find ways to discuss them openly and honestly with one another.

I have seen many ways that the simple recognition of diverse feminist perspectives has fostered such discussions in the church. At an inter-seminary conference on feminism two years ago, for example, some women said that they were afraid to express their views because they felt their positions would not be seen by other women as “feminist.” Although they understood themselves to be Christian feminists, they suddenly presupposed that feminism was to be equated

with the ideas of a more vocal group at the conference, who held, among other views, that women should engage in theological discussion with women but not with men. Once encouraged to express what they meant by “Christian feminism,” the other group, which found discussion with men to be valuable, discovered both differences and similarities among individuals in the two groups. In the process of defining their positions more carefully, all participants in the discussion gained insight into their own experiences as women and into the content of their faith. The recognition of diversity within feminism prompted one of our most meaningful discussions about feminism and about faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, in addition to facilitating this kind of open dialogue in the church about feminist issues, the recognition and study of diverse feminist perspectives can also deepen the church’s theological reflection. Even if a Christian does not agree with certain feminist views, especially those outside the church, it is necessary for the church to pay attention to the wide variety of views and questions that feminists are presenting. This is because these diverse views can deepen our understanding of three major resources of theological reflection: the analysis of our contemporary situation, the Christian tradition, and the Bible.

Diverse feminist perspectives help the church, in the first place, to understand and assess the contemporary situation. By addressing the situation of women, feminists offer insight into questions and problems of contemporary life that affect us all. Our need to understand the contemporary situation follows from our call to proclaim the gospel and to love others. Understanding the concerns of our time is part of proclaiming the gospel because proclamation is intelligible and powerful to others only when it speaks to their situation. Feminist perspectives—however diverse—help us understand that situation. Understanding the contemporary situation is also an essential part of loving and serving others because love of neighbor requires knowledge of the neighbor’s needs. The diverse range of feminist literature helps the church to understand the needs and struggles of men and women today.

Diverse feminist perspectives also help the church to understand and evaluate the Christian tradition. Feminists raise challenging and often uncomfortable questions about elements of the tradition. These questions encourage Christians to look again at their tradition and to reflect on the meaning of the Christian message. This kind of critical self-reflection allows them to rediscover aspects of the tradition that have been neglected and to sharpen their perspectives on the gospel.

One example of the ways that feminists have prompted critical reflection

on the Christian tradition is through their discussion of language about God. Although language about God has always been a concern in the Christian tradition and has been discussed in new ways with the recent work on the nature of religious symbols by thinkers such as Paul Tillich, Paul Ricoeur, Norman Perrin, and Clifford Geertz, some feminists are raising the issue with unique urgency. Their urgency arises out of their concern about the negative effects that they see stemming from narrow uses of images of God, particularly of the image of God as father. They have called this image into question because they see ways that it has been used (both intentionally and unintentionally) to legitimize male supremacy.<sup>5</sup>

Feminists both inside and outside the church have offered a variety of responses to the critique of the image of God as father. Some feminists suggest using female imagery for God and

reject male imagery altogether. Carol Christ warns, for example, that “religious symbol systems focused around exclusively male images of divinity create the impression that female power can never be legitimate or wholly beneficial.”<sup>6</sup> She suggests that women use the symbol of Goddess, for it affirms the powers, bodies, wills, and bonds of women. Other feminists find that the language of father can be one appropriate way of speaking about God, but they specify ways that this language is misused and attempt to retrieve the richness of its meaning.<sup>7</sup> Still other feminists focus their attention on other images from the Bible or suggest new names for God. Sallie McFague, for example, speaks of God as “mother, lover, and friend” and relates these metaphors to several biblical passages and to the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>8</sup> Mary Daly wants to move away from anthropomorphic symbols of God altogether and speaks of God in terms of the dynamic verb, “Be-ing.”<sup>9</sup>

These kinds of diverse responses have prompted renewed and exciting critical reflection on the nature of language about God. The church has been challenged to discuss, for example, the limits of God-language. The discussion generated by feminists has reminded the church of what the Christian tradition has always claimed about language of God: our language cannot completely exhaust the meaning of God. God remains radically incomprehensible even when we speak about God in our clearest images, concepts, symbols, and names. Therefore, no language of the divine should be absolutized.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the feminist discussion has challenged the church to speak about God and God’s activity in the world in more adequate and meaningful ways. This discussion has prompted both men and women in the church to ask them-

<sup>5</sup>Mary Daly argues, for example, that “if God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people, then it is the nature of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated”; quoted from her book, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) 13.

<sup>6</sup>Carol Christ, “Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological, and Political Reflections,” *Womanspirit Rising*, 275.

<sup>7</sup>The view is voiced more often informally or in discussion groups than in written form. Two recent articles that reflect on positive ways that “God the Father” can be used are Janet Landwehr, “Coming Home to Father,” *Lutheran Partners* 4/2 (1988) 12-13; and Gracia Grindal, “Reflections on God ‘the Father,’” *Word & World* 4 (1984) 76-86.

<sup>8</sup>Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). See also her book, *Metaphorical Theology* (London, SCM, 1983).

<sup>9</sup>Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 33-34.

<sup>10</sup>One way Mary Potter Engel points “to the truth of our experience of never being able to grasp God” is by speaking of God as “the One who dwells in Glory.” See her essay, “Tambourines to the Glory of God,” *Word & World* 7 (1987) 160.

selves whether their proclamation of the gospel has indeed been intelligible to others and to seek creative and clear ways of proclaiming it.

Diverse feminist perspectives deepen theological reflection in a third way by helping the church to interpret the Bible more carefully. As stated above, some feminists reject the Bible altogether. Although most Christian feminists would not agree with these post-biblical positions, their questions have prompted the church to look more closely at the sections of the Bible that appear to subordinate women to men and to reexamine the biblical message. Several feminists who believe in the Bible’s authoritative witness have taken on this challenge and have offered some new and often insightful interpretations of the texts. The work of biblical scholars such as

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Phyllis Trible has been especially valuable. These women use a variety of standard methods of interpretation, such as redaction, literary, and historical criticism. The freshness of their approach comes from the questions they raise about the status and role of women in the Bible.<sup>11</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza, for example, studies the role of women in the early church and argues that the early church was a community of equals, whose structure was later influenced by the patriarchal structures of Greco-Roman society.<sup>12</sup> By approaching the Bible with these questions, biblical feminists have provided some striking and challenging interpretations of the Bible that need to be taken seriously, even if not every scholar agrees with their conclusions.

Listening to diverse feminist voices can be, then, an occasion for those of us in the church to deepen our own discussions about feminism and to enrich our reflection on the contemporary situation, the Christian tradition, and the Bible. These are ways for us to learn more about the questions and concerns of those inside and outside the church and to look more honestly at ourselves. Such knowledge of others and critical self-reflection help us do what the church is called to do: to proclaim the gospel and to love and serve others. It is this call that impels us to learn about those around us and to examine the ways that we understand and proclaim the gospel. It is this call, then, that also impels us to listen to the diverse voices of feminism.

These voices are at times threatening. They challenge us to see the needs of others and to reexamine our most deeply held beliefs about God and ourselves. It is precisely this challenge, however, that makes these diverse voices such powerful resources for the church. If we keep the call of the church in mind, then we can hear these diverse voices not as threats but as invitations to understand others and ourselves more clearly. In this way, these voices provide us with resources for using our own voices in rich conversation with one another, in fervent love of neighbor, and in life-giving proclamation of the gospel.

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of possible distinctive characteristics of feminist hermeneutics, see the *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 22 (1982) 3-71; *Semeia* 28 (1983); and articles in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*.

<sup>12</sup>Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).