



## **Given Feminism, Does Theology Need a New Starting Point?**

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How “new” the starting point of feminist theology seems will depend on how explicitly experiential and socially transformative is the theology with which one is comparing it. Feminist theology is not unique in giving primacy to the role of human experience in the theological endeavor, but it is distinctive in how it understands and draws upon experience and in the way it critiques and re-forms theology and action in light of that experience.

Feminist theology critiques those theologies that purport to be based on Scripture and confessions in a way that is separable from human experience and action. The presumed “universality” or “revealed truth” of such theologies actually masks the particular perspectives and interests embedded within them, which have been pervasively male dominant. Any theological method which implicitly isolates and privileges the experience of Western white males as absolute and applicable to all human persons is steadfastly challenged by feminist theology.

The radicality of that challenge varies. For some it is sufficient if the theological tradition is “corrected” with the inclusion of women, along with perspectives, symbols, and language reflective of such. For others, the whole Christian tradition is so thoroughly sexist that none of its symbols or formulations is retrievable. Many would accept this thoroughgoing critique of inherited traditions, but move from there to a radical reformation of theology’s own self-understanding and vision. It is especially from out of this latter position that new starting points and methodological shifts are emerging, with significance for the whole theological enterprise.

For many feminist theologians the biblical text or a given theological tradition is not by itself either the starting point or the norm. It is not authoritative in an absolute, abstract sense, but comes to function that way within a particular socio-historical community. A text becomes authoritative through the relation of experience, action, and interpretation. The world revealed by the text is a world shaped in part by interpretive action.

Feminist theology reads and critiques the texts of a religious tradition in

light of their effect on women. What do the symbols, doctrines, language for God and religious experience, and ecclesial structures imply about women? How have women’s experiences been shaped and influenced by such? What are the consequences not only for women but for men, children, and the rest of creation? The meaning of texts or symbols lies in their consequences for how we live and structure our lives.

Rebecca Chopp has described how feminist theology’s appropriation of experience is

distinctive. Experience is not a-historical, unconnected, or abstract. Instead, the focus is on the concrete lived experience of actual women who are treated as other, inferior, evil, and who because of violence and poverty fear for their own survival. Women's experiences are understood not dualistically but in their interconnectedness: the private and the public dimensions, nature and history, the social and the personal. Such experience is necessarily pluralistic, and needs to be appreciated in its diversity without premature generalizations (e.g., regarding the presumed oppressiveness of a given tradition for all women).

Hence, the starting point of feminist theology is deeply *pastoral*. It begins with the concrete experiences of real human beings, not in order to apply timeless truths to their lives, but to open up a pragmatic inquiry that seeks to understand the pains and contradictions in those experiences. Something isn't right; relations aren't just. Because of the dissatisfaction with "the way things are," and the realization that androcentric understandings of the tradition have reinforced such, the interpretive task is approached with a bias to change symbols, consciousness, institutions, and structures so that they might better reflect God's gracious, just intentions for all creation.

The starting point is simultaneously *pastoral* and *transformative*. Experience is oriented to effecting new possibilities that are transformative of what is presently being experienced. Bringing present experience to the interpretation of the text leads to the imaging of new models and meanings for both the text and the present situation.

Theology is not reflection on absolute or timeless truths. The social context of the viewer inevitably conditions what is viewed. The truth of something cannot be abstracted from the effects that that "truth" has on historical, lived experience. Thus, it is insufficient to try to abstract or retrieve the original meaning of a text or symbol because the history of distortion and oppression in which it has become implicated is an inextricable part of the meaning of that text or symbol. What women have experienced in relation to those texts or symbols is what necessitates major reformation in theological method and content. It is not that feminist experience becomes a new absolute, but it becomes the basis for an ongoing critique of that which excludes, oppresses, or creates new "outsiders," and thus betrays the heart of the biblical dynamic.

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Given feminism, does theology now need a new starting point and radically new methods? As Carol Christ noted more than ten years ago, there have been at least two broad responses to this question by feminist scholars in religion: that of "reformist" Christian feminist theologians who wish to sustain their dual commitment to Christian faith and to the full human dignity and development of women, and that of "radical" or "post-Christian" feminists, for whom Christianity is irreformably sexist. Obviously, for post-Christian feminists, theology does indeed need new resources and new methods. But what about Christian feminist theologians like myself, who have committed our lives to the conviction that Christian faith and life need not be irreformably sexist?

Christian feminist theologians have themselves clearly and painfully recognized the overwhelming evidence of misogyny in our Christian Scriptures and traditions and in the church today. We know too well the effects much of the Christian Scriptures and traditions have had on women: millions of women have been psychologically, physically, and socially maimed and even murdered in the name of Jesus Christ, and their lives and names then erased from historical memory. We know as well in our own lives and those of our daughters, students, and friends how often it is the case today that Christians and Christian churches are not more but less just, less fair, less capable of nurturing the equal dignity of all human beings and the valuing of all life than is even the secular society at large. And we know how “odd” and how new is the very presence of ours and other women’s voices in the Christian theological conversation; we are haunted by the echoing silences in our history and behind our crowded theological bookshelves.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that articles and books in Christian feminist theology frequently begin with claims to be inaugurating an entirely new starting point or new method in Christian theology: our very presence in the Christian theological conversation is undeniably new, as are many of the critical questions we must bring to it. At work in all of these “new methods,” however, are some very old questions, questions which have been infused with a new

critical complexity and new urgency by contemporary feminism and yet remain at the heart of all Christian theological reflection. These questions might roughly be summarized as follows: (1) Is it Christian? Given our new awareness of what David Tracy has called the plurality and ambiguity of our Scriptures and traditions—not only the irreducible variety of Christian theologies and forms of life in the biblical texts and Christian traditions, but also their infection with the systematic distortions of sexism, racism, anti-semitism, classism, slavery, and exploitation of the earth—how do we go about determining the “identity” of what is, and is not, authentically Christian? (2) Is it relevant? How can this Christian vision speak effectively to women and men today? Can it speak to—and even more importantly, can it be spoken out of—the experiences of contemporary women? How can this truly be gospel, good news, for us and for the world today—good news that is not just proclaimed at us, but which we proclaim? (3) Is it true? Is this Christian vision disclosive and transformative? Can it light up broader and deeper dimensions of reality as well as engender a transformed personal and communal life which reflects and enacts that richer, more comprehensive vision?

While the variety of Christian feminist theologies may begin with anyone of these questions—with biblical studies, for instance, or contemporary women’s experience, or with proposals concerning “pragmaticist” criteria for truth—all three of these questions (each in interaction with the others) continue to be posed in and remain central to our common Christian feminist theological task. Certainly, there are frequent and often vigorous debates among us about just how each of these questions is to be answered. Is the Christian identity of our vision to be located in a historical reconstruction of the spirit-filled discipleship of equals in the early Jesus movement, in the paradoxical affirmations and idol-shattering reversals of Mark’s story of the crucified messiah, or in the cosmic, all-encompassing visions of Colossians, Logos christology, and process thought? And just what is the character of “women’s experience” or “feminist experience” which is at the heart of the question of contemporary relevance? The critical debates are often strenuous and even, at times, combative: Christian faith and the lives of

women are important. And yet there seems to be at work in the whole Christian feminist conversation what Jean Lambert names an “F” (feminist) factor: “a critical, patient, stubborn generosity toward divergent opinions” which is reflected in “efforts to keep the most disparate discussants and their ideas in conversation, rather than excluding them on the basis of some new orthodoxy, even a ‘feminist’ one” (“An ‘F’ Factor,” *Journal of Feminist Studies* 1/2 (Fall 1985): 93-113).

That which guides and energizes the contemporary Christian feminist theological conversation is not some single new feminist “method” but that which alone guides and motivates all true conversation: shared questions, questions which I believe are at the heart of all Christian theology, yet have been given anew critical edge and passionate urgency due to our tensive dual commitment to Christianity and to women. Can our common pursuit of these questions yield a Christian vision and praxis which is both profoundly Christian and supportive of the full humanity of women? We’re staking our lives on it.