



## Turning Points in Feminist Theology

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We are witnessing the long-term impact of feminist consciousness raising and feminist theology these days. Feminist voices are being heard broadly, and their influence is no longer new but becoming a strand of tradition. Feminist emphases are being passed along—the torch moves from hand to hand.

Without assessing the ultimate or corrective value of this feminist inheritance—or trying to sort out all the intricacies of this or that theologian—there is still some sense in calling attention to key issues that surface from within that movement or that emerge in the encounter of feminists with those who are “somewhat” outside.

By definition, a male theologian would seem to be outside the feminist frame of reference. Of course there are some males who have so identified with the feminist cause that they too would be counted as feminist. One can always define feminist, but not in ways that everyone will accept. “Feminists affirm the equal importance of females and males” is a place to start, but it doesn’t go far enough to satisfy. So here let me acknowledge that I write as a theologian who has interest in the feminist movement and a stake in its theological impact.

When feminist concerns get labeled “theology” they put themselves in a wider area of discourse. “Feminist” may define a point of view, a point of departure, a hermeneutic, if you will, but when it is called “theology,” it makes claims that are comprehensive and include the realities that other people deal with from different perspectives.

So it makes sense for one who is either “in” or “out” of the feminist circle to do some thinking about key issues raised in this framework. That is what I want to do here. I am inviting attention to issues I see, proposing that they represent basic decisions faced by the feminist stream of Christian theology.

I am calling these issues “turning points” because I think they reflect the need for choices within the feminist movement and similar decisions for those

who seek to include constructive emphases from feminism in the broader life of theology and church. Such choices also imply some exclusive identification: turning toward one emphasis will mean turning away from another. Christian theology has always had to do that, and such painful assessments face feminist theology as well.

It will not be enough to acknowledge that some feminist theologians like Mary Daly have self-consciously turned away from the Christian inheritance. Recognition of a more subtle loss of the Christian “center” will also be necessary. That is what theology must always be about, and feminist theology is no exception. Every theological movement finds in its own contribution both

paths that genuinely move forward and tempting roadways that run in a very different “faith” direction.

Whenever anyone makes proposals about differences in a corrective or revolutionary movement, one immediate reaction is to circle the wagons and insist that the whole movement is under attack. It is a principle in liberation theology that calling attention to different kinds of liberation thought can be just a subtle way of undercutting the transforming power of the entire movement. Just so, noticing differences among feminists can be seen as a divide-and-conquer strategy. That need not be the case. I am claiming that the most loyal feminist champions have to do the same thing. No movement can go on simply applauding everything that is said in its name or protecting all its members by such explanations as “the oppressive male society has forced them to these positions.” If feminist theologians have to pick and choose directions, then it is important for others to report where they see the need for such decisions. So I hope I can now comment about some turning points, even painful points of stress, that I see.

## I. NORMS AND HIERARCHIES

One issue that emerges both from within feminist theology and in its encounter with other modes of Christian reflection is the question of the normative role of Scripture—especially the apostolic witness to Jesus as the Christ. Since this biblical literature can be seen as dominated by masculine and patriarchal perspectives, the question arises as to how much it can be trusted. Can it provide the standard by which faith claims and practices are to be judged? Scripture as the only or decisive norm for faith and practice is what the church has taught. Feminist theology struggles with just how this can still be appropriate.

The norm issue is complicated by the fact that norms enable people to arrange things in some scheme of priority from the most dependable to the least. Standards tend to set up hierarchies—pyramids or levels of importance. Here too feminist theology raises questions about the dangers of all hierarchical thinking and structures. It is not strictly inclusive or egalitarian. So along with the Bible as norm, the broader question of even thinking about normative perspectives or relative priority is at issue.

Recently, at an American Academy of Religion session on Christology, two self-identified feminist women theologians dialogued about the canon of the New Testament. The one stated that turning to patently gnostic literature

was a helpful corrective to the New Testament and its patriarchal slant. Since the Bible seemed such a male-oriented quagmire, why not turn to early literature of the Christian era which more clearly elevated the female? The other theologian asked the key question: “I’m appreciative of so much in feminist theology, but is the Bible then still ‘normative’ for you?” The first theologian replied: “Yes, but not in any hierarchical way.” Her point was that the Bible doesn’t “exclude” or “govern” the way other sources are used.

The alternatives seen here in concrete dialogue bring the issue to the surface. Do the “Holy Scriptures” of the Christian faith stand in some kind of authoritative role over-against or above other literature? Do they, in fact, provide theologians with a way of making judgments about what is Christian and what is not? At the very least, do they enable some assessment of other materials as to their compatibility or fit with the Christian faith?

Obviously there are things that can be learned from non-biblical literature. The claim that the Bible is the Word of God is rarely intended to mean that God speaks *only* here. Rather, it is the claim that what God says here through human vehicles is definitive in a way that will not allow other sources to supersede it.

In the end, feminist theologians will have to come clean on this issue. They will demand it of themselves. Even the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” which raises such interesting questions about what is biased or omitted, will need to take its place alongside some decision about a “hermeneutic of confidence” that will keep suspicions from wiping out the power of the inherited witness material.<sup>1</sup> At some point, in order for feminist theology to be Christian theology, the inherited witness will have to be given the clear benefit of the doubt. Call it the influence of the Holy Spirit or inspiration. This sets some limits for the feminist critique. In the end, the question is whether a faith that is liberating for both men and women can be transmitted through a male-dominated Scripture. If it can’t, the very persistence of Christians down through the centuries is problematic. My guess is that any feminist theology which wants to continue as Christian theology will have to say much more about how it can treat Scripture as normative. It will have to say clearly that this witness material *does* set a standard.

## II. ONE SAVIOR FOR ALL?

Closely tied with the normative issue is the Christian claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the only-begotten of God—the one and once-for-all Savior of the world. Even when the canon is seen as normative with Christ as its central message, feminist theology is strongly tempted to adopt liberation theology’s “discipleship” Christology. Jesus is seen as the model for Christian life-style, but his role as cosmic and personal Savior is neglected.<sup>2</sup>

One clearly feminist feature of this issue of Jesus as Savior is the fact that this savior is a man—a particular human being who happens to be male.

<sup>1</sup>For the “hermeneutic of suspicion,” see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>2</sup>For example, see Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing With Milk and Honey* (New York: Crossroad, 1986) 199-200.

Feminists struggle with whether a male savior can save those who are of another gender. Wouldn’t it be better if Jesus had been female—or at least androgynous—somehow both male and female? Sometimes feminist theologians have proposed that we think of Jesus as female as another corrective to male domination.

The key question is whether one particular human being can be the savior of others who are not exactly represented. The very character of the gospel message of salvation is at stake here. Classic Christian theology has Jesus saving other people both because he was like them—and because he was different. Sometimes the assumption of a generalized human nature seemed the way out—and this approach has recurred in feminist theology. For the second person of the Trinity to assume a “human nature” would then include the feminine as well as the masculine. This direction of theological development is surely a part of the Christian theological inheritance, but if it becomes the *main* route for dealing with Jesus, it leads away from history toward very abstract universals—indeed, right into the docetic heresy that Jesus only *appeared* to be a

historical, particular human being. As the Antioch theologians knew long ago in their controversies with the Alexandrians, the specificity of Jesus' humanness is also crucial. Human nature without a human individual is problematic. This is not just an issue of the identity of Christ, but a matter of the way the gospel "saves" and the shape of Christian faith.

If the gospel of and about Jesus frees human beings from the external demands of the law—so that people are free to be themselves, and not conformed to some generalized view of human beings—it is the particularity of Jesus that is absolutely decisive for the empowering character of the Christian witness. If Jesus is a particular person—Jewish, young, male, short, tall, or whatever—then the message of the gospel can free others to be the particular people *they* are—old, American, African, female, male, etc. What is affirmed about Jesus sets the pattern for the salvation of others. Moving too strongly to "human nature" runs the risk of turning grace and freedom into a new law.

So one could hope that feminist theology would not diminish the importance of Jesus' particularity—including his male gender—too quickly. Some of us will continue to see just this particularity of Jesus as important for the liberation of all people. It shapes a gospel message that affirms Jesus' uniqueness as the one Savior and which frees others to live out their own specific destiny in bodies, times, and places that are truly different.

This matter of Jesus' maleness is complicated in the feminist frame of reference because it is often discussed with assumptions that are more political than theological. The battle lines are drawn, and the intellectual assumptions are pressed into the background beyond recognition or criticism. With feminism, one such key assumption is epistemological. It has to do with how common understanding or knowledge develops. It charts the way toward truth.

In the feminist movement it is often assumed that men understand and empathize with men, and only women can understand and empathize with women. This is sometimes elevated to a principle about knowledge and its pursuit. Similarity is taken as the basis for understanding. Like understands like.

In Christian theology there is another assumption at work—sometimes called the "coincidence of opposites"—that assumes that difference or contrast

is the key to understanding. For many Christians—even whole traditions and denominations—it is the character of the gospel as a word from outside our experience—and outside of us—that makes all the difference. It is an "external word" that brings understanding—*not* something that agrees with our nature or past identifications, whether they be Jewish or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Gospel epistemology presses us toward hospitality to the stranger on the basis of a word from outside our natural capacities and common experience. Yes, it is a word about Christ dying for the ungodly, while we were yet sinners, that creates Christians who do not build their understanding on strict similarity of experience.

Essentially, this concern about an approach to understanding is focused on revelation. Either Jesus is somehow the bearer of a special disclosure of God's character which we cannot produce of ourselves—or the impact of his life, death, and resurrection is something *less* than the salvation the church has claimed. Maintaining that Jesus is the Savior elevates one particular person. It gives one historical event the status of a special initiative from beyond us. It is God's redemptive intervention that adds something radically new to our situation, shaping our thoughts

in new ways that will not permit “homogenous” views of how understanding and relationships are grounded.

### III. GOD, KNOWN OR UNKNOWN

Problems with Jesus as Savior turn quickly into reservations about the dependable knowledge of God. What happens in a fair amount of feminist theology is that the very concept of revelation is diminished. It is assumed that no human claims can indicate anything definitive about God’s character.

Sometimes it is asserted that the basic thrust of the Christian faith is God as mysterious and unknowable. God is by definition so far above the human that any knowledge claims are pretentious and distorting, with patriarchy as the chief example. Absolute inclusiveness in God can stress this same distance. God encompasses everything and therefore cannot be this or that.<sup>3</sup>

Here again one feature of the Christian tradition is lifted up in away that can cut the heart out of the gospel. The hidden God, or the mystery of God, is often held up as though the main thing about the Christian faith is what we don’t know about God. God is made so transcendent or so inclusive that all religious claims of revelation are equally untenable.

There is another way of dealing with God’s mystery. That is based on knowledge that is relational and not easily expressed or quantified. It asserts that God’s mystery increases precisely because in Jesus we know something definite about God’s demands and promises. It claims that the kind of forgiveness and love we see in Jesus is the essence of God’s own character, and that is more awesome the longer we live with it. God’s hiddenness, then, is the mystery of *what we know* in Christ—not the fact that God is simply too great for any human being to grasp.

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<sup>3</sup>See Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God-Christ-Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1982): “The deepest meaning of God as Son in incarnation is not at all the maleness of Jesus or even the Sonship of God, but the inclusiveness of incarnation, embracing every form of the social divisions of humanity” (p. 220).

In feminist theology the turn towards absolute transcendence is reinforced by the rediscovery that images and metaphors are the essential currency of our language about God. Multiplying metaphors looks like a good idea, but it can loosen up any specific claims of revelation that would hold. Then speech about God is seen as “merely” metaphorical and therefore not binding or really dependable. Often this occurs precisely when attempts are made to enrich the masculine images that have dominated Christian God-concepts. Surely such attempts can be more faithful to the diversity of the biblical witness. Experientially, the attempts to enrich our images—to see many of them as complementary—can often be useful. But they run the risk of making us hang loose to all the metaphors, making any claims that “God’s character” has been revealed in one special person difficult, if not impossible.<sup>4</sup>

So it is not surprising that serious critics of some feminist emphases would stress that the “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” formula is more than a collection of analogies or metaphors. Robert Jenson’s strong assertion that this Triune identification is a proper name is one of the more helpful lines of argument.<sup>5</sup> He sees that what is at stake in some proposed shifts of language and images is the very historical particularity of God’s revelation in Jesus. Feminist theologians need to deal with that issue, because if there is *no* definitive revelation of God in Jesus, who needs “Christian” theology at all?

When special revelation is diminished, one can understand the emergence of a strong emphasis on “creation spirituality” in feminist theology.<sup>6</sup> Concentrating on the birthing role of women brings an appreciation of the natural as a clue to theological interpretation. Just being a woman, with the mothering ability and instincts, can easily be elevated to a place where natural features of childbirth tend to diminish the need for a new birth in Christ. The recognition of sin in male domination is not necessarily accompanied by a similar sense of sin in female experience, or in basic human experience. The result can be a return to creation and nature as much more fundamental clues to what God is than any reliance on the redemptive intervention in Jesus.

We surely want a new appreciation of women’s experiences. But in theology do we not also need to be careful of directions that lead us away from the specific understanding of sin and redemption that have been central for Christianity? Is the theological answer to be found in a turn back to creation, back to nature as needing no redemption? Again, as Robert Jenson reminds us, in ancient Israel there were religious reasons for rejecting female images of God associated with fertility religions.<sup>7</sup> If Jenson is even partly right, the danger exists in feminist theology that the gospel “baby” will be thrown out with the masculine “bath water.” William Oddie says it well in the title of his book, *What Will Happen to God?*<sup>8</sup> One may surely differ with some of his concerns and treat-

<sup>4</sup>Ted Peters, “On Adding Divine Mothers to the Bible,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 13 (1986) 176-84.

<sup>5</sup>Robert W. Jenson, “The Triune God,” *Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 87-95.

<sup>6</sup>“Creation spirituality” is a much broader phenomenon than just a feature of feminist theology. For example, see Matthew Fox, *The Original Blessing* (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1983). In any Christian perspective this turn to creation raises problems concerning sin and salvation.

<sup>7</sup>R. Jenson, “The Triune God,” 93-95.

<sup>8</sup>William Oddie, *What Will Happen to God? Feminism and the Reconstruction of Christian Belief* (Bristol, England: Photobooks, 1984).

ment, but whether or not Christians can continue to claim to know what is dependable and decisive about God—that’s the question!

#### IV. MEN AND WOMEN IN PARTNERSHIP

There are other “turning points” in feminist theology which surely could be highlighted. I want to note one more which again is the combination of the political and theological. At some points feminist theology so closely identifies with advocacy for the feminine that the difference between politics and theology is not maintained. I know they can’t be entirely separated, but if theology reduces to advocacy and strategies for *any* particular type of people, it is likely to quit being theology or thought about God. It becomes the articulation of another “special interest” group. The comprehensive context of theological claims tends to get lost.<sup>9</sup>

When theology gets narrowed in this way, it will not promote conversation between the sexes about God. There will need to be some space *beyond* the advocacy and strategy. In that space differences can be shared. Commonality can be discovered. Mutual criticisms can be heard. Partnership can be developed.

One of the strengths of feminist theology is its explicit interest in community and

partnership. Yes, even between women and men! But it often doesn't work out that way. In order for it to do so, some *space* needs to be there so theology is more than "feminine" or "masculine."

Along these lines, feminist theology could help by more discriminating treatment of the Christian theological tradition. Many of the best themes in feminist theology have been articulated by male theologians in some strands of the pre-feminist theological tradition. The whole Franciscan school in Roman Catholicism is an example of a "male" dominated strand of thought that is more holistic and feeling-oriented than some other strands of the same catholic heritage. In other words, it doesn't help females and males to be partners in theology when all of the theology ever done by males is lumped in the same "patriarchal, domineering, insensitive" category. One reason it doesn't help is because it isn't true.

If feminist theology wants to be theology for a whole people or community, coming to terms with a more discriminating approach to "male" theology would seem essential. That also applies to contemporary theology. Conversation with those who are not feminist theologians is essential—both for the benefit of non-feminists and for feminists themselves.

There are some signs of this happening, but frequently the label "feminist" is used precisely to cut off any interchange with other schools of thought. Here feminists run the very same risks as other movements. The club mentality can take over, bringing distortions about the unique contribution and character of one's own group. Investment in the new school is so great that pride of membership can take precedence over honesty in the intellectual enterprise.

This political dimension of theological matters is just as crucial in the life

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<sup>9</sup>The pattern is suggested in statements like this: "Feminist studies are therefore primarily accountable to the women's movement for societal-ecclesial change rather than to the academy." E. Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xxii.

of communities of faith. If Christian theology is intended to serve the life and proclamation of the Christian community, then this issue of partnership is also relevant there. More truthfulness about ways in which both sexes have acted inappropriately in church life would be helpful. It is commonly thought that males have dominated the church. Certainly in public leadership roles that's true, but in the background things are a lot more complex. It would help to remember that in some ways people have experienced the church as primarily an organization of and for women, perhaps women and children. Getting and keeping men active in worship has often had to be a concern for pastors. I remember when I was considering preparation for ordination some thirty years ago. One of my major questions then was whether the church was a place where a "man" would really fit in. In our neighborhood, folklore still has it that on Sunday morning the women go to church—and the men to the volunteer firehouse.

I hope today, in the concern for inclusiveness which feminist theology espouses, that honest partnership between the sexes would be on the agenda. My point is that the way we do theology (now seeming to identify with special interest groups) runs the risk of making such partnerships more difficult. This may be the place where feminist theology faces its most serious practical test.

In the end, the issues or turning points in feminist theology are *not* just women's issues. They are issues of the truth and power of the Christian gospel. They are the same issues that non-feminists face in other ways. Could we do theology together as "Christian" theologians? Yes,

some feminist theology would then be seen as turning away from Christian substance, and some male interpretations (both in the present and in the historical tradition) could turn out to be supportive both to the gospel and to women. I hope for that kind of partnership.