

# Women and Religion



by Sheila McDonough



In the context of academic studies, the expression 'women and religion' raises immediately the question as to whether one is viewing the phenomena from the perspective of religious studies (history of religion, sciences religieuses, religionswissenschaft) or of theology. Most of the present writing on the subject falls under the latter category, as is evident from titles like A Different Heaven and Earth, Beyond God the Father, New Woman, New Earth and Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective.

(1)

The aim of all these writers is to articulate a vision of what should be believed and acted upon. They assume that heaven and earth can and should be transformed and/or redeemed. In so thinking, they are all directly in the tradition of Augustine's City of God. Lao Tzu would rather say that since there is no city or god worth bothering about, why not go fishing? This point is made in order to emphasize that sophisticated self-understanding should carry with it explicit recognition of one's assumptions and the sources of those assumptions.

Theology as a discipline that attempts to articulate what a religious tradition should mean has so far been almost exclusively Christian. That is to say, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists have not produced writings comparable to Christian theology. Jews and Muslims have occasionally ventured in this direction but it has never been a central interest. Nothing in the Indian, Chinese or Japanese traditions is directly comparable. Thus one might ask--are Christians peculiar because they do theology; or why are the others peculiar because they do not? Owing to the fact that, at this point in history, the civilization that has emerged from Christianity owns most of the typewriters, most of the writing gets done by products of that civilization. These latter can easily imagine that their situation is the representative human one since few books come flying back into their faces to challenge them.

Anyone who now works with women 'outside the western world' knows that reactions to what is heard there about western feminists is very ambivalent and complex. For example, if we pro-

claim to Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists, that God should be called Mother not Father, the response in every case would be bewilderment. Among Muslims, no one would dream of calling God either Father or Mother. Hindus have always stressed Mother. Buddhists can say, 'both and,' 'neither, but' and so forth. The problem posed in those terms is a peculiarly Christian one. That issue can serve to represent the larger one. There is no way to assert finally that any of the solutions and directions put forth with respect to belief and practice by women emerging out of the western Christian tradition apply to, or are meaningful for, women whose sense of self and the cosmos has been shaped by different cultural pre-suppositions. Most of the contemporary 'feminist theology' does not seriously acknowledge this cultural diversity. Both Rosemary Ruether and Mary Daly assume that their exhortatory visions are universally valid. Theology according to Ruether is going through a striking transformation. . . . It is beginning to find its place as the mode of reflection that mediates between the existence and the transcendent horizon of human life. Theology is losing its confinement as an exclusively ecclesiastical science, but only because it is finding its place in a reintegrated view of the human community. (3)

There are Christian theologians other than the feminists who presently are making claims like this for the rights

and duties of theology. But such claims are not accepted either by representatives of the non-western, including Jewish, traditions, or by scholars in the academic discipline of religious studies. The matter is debated within the latter discipline but the consensus is against the claims of those who wish to 'theologize' on behalf of humanity.

Ninian Smart's The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge is a representative instance of the arguments given within the discipline of religious studies for the refusal to equate these studies with theology. He argues:

The theologian qua theologian is engaged in articulating a faith and defending it. This being so, his knowledge of other faiths becomes an instrument to activities such as the theology of mission and dialogue. (4)

Smart says that for religious studies the works of the theologians just form part of the data upon which the 'religious scientist' reflects.

what then, is the scientific study of religion? To put the answer briefly and in a somewhat prickly manner, it is an enterprise which is aspectual, polymethodic, pluralistic, and without clear boundaries. . . . Thus one needs to treat religion by the methods of history, sociological inquiry, phenomenology and so on. It is pluralistic because

there are many religions and religious traditions and it would appear that no full study of religion can properly be undertaken without becoming immersed in more than one tradition.(5)

The religious scientist, the practitioner of the discipline of religious studies, thus does not deny validity to theology as a discipline but she insists that there are many possible forms of theology and that these forms are just part of the data from the perspective of her discipline. A religious scientist might have her own theological position, as might a political scientist, or an anthropologist or any other scholar but she would be clear as to the distinction between the work done in the discipline and her own commitments.

The feminist movement has had its impact on religious studies as it has on all other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. In all these cases, the impact of feminism has been to cause new questions to be asked and new data to be collected. There has been a complex inter-relationship between religious studies and feminist theology because much of the data gathered in the former discipline has been used by the latter. Specifically, the recovery of some degree of knowledge of ancient mother-goddesses and of witches emerges from religious studies but is used by the theologians.

But the differences between the two disciplines means that insights which can be lightly held as hypotheses in religious studies come to be affirmed as fact by those theologians who base their claims to certain knowledge on a particular interpretation of human religious history. For example, brilliant though Mary Daly is in many ways, she is a very uncritical historian. Thus she takes Elizabeth Gould Davis The First Sex as an authoritative analysis of the ancient Mediterranean and Margaret Murray's work on witchcraft as an accurate study of that phenomenon.(6) Rosemary Ruether is a much better historian and she well knows that both those studies have failed to stand the test of critical analysis.(7)

On the question of the ancient Mediterranean, we are better served if we realize that all we have, or ever can have, are fragments. Nothing more than a flash of insight is possible when dealing with a long dead civilization. These flashes can be immensely helpful in stimulating us to imagine hitherto undreamed of ways of being human. But intellectual integrity requires us to hold the insight lightly realizing that we can never know how closely our guesses might accord to what was. Even so, a new idea is an effective reality of its own in relation to present and future. Thus, even if we are all wrong in supposing that a mother goddess was ever worshipped, it is still a fact that now we have the

idea and that nothing can stop us developing the theme for the future if we wish to do so.

One of the most illuminating glimpses of a difficult religious world that I know comes from Sappho. (8) From her poetry one can guess at a lost world in which the Goddess was revered for her hilarious heart and in which her devotees indulged themselves in joyous offering of song and dance in the cool glades where her presence whispered to them from the lightly dancing leaves. If there have been no magnificent women poets since Sappho, the reason may be the crushing weight of the gnostic misogyny that has exterminated that spontaneity from feminine hearts. This is a guess, hopefully an enlightened one. (9)

Merlin Stone's book The Paradise Papers is useful for the perception of lost values she receives when her trained sculptor's eye roams over the images of the ancient goddesses. (10) But it should be read for those insights into the lost past and not as final truth about what happened in history.

Feminist concerns have stimulated scholars in religious studies to attempt many different types of study. Eventually, we may hope for something like The Religious Experience of Woman-kind to complement The Religious Experience of Mankind. (11) But so far most of the data is not in. Much writing is being done in non-western

languages, most of it not translated. The long work of discovering how and in what ways women have been religious lies before us. And there is also the question as to how women are religious now. Almost nothing has been written on this. Nancy Falk's review article points to three examples relevant to religious studies. (12) Hindu women are arguing for a new interpretation of Sita--as a model of resourceful courage, rather than a passive instrument. We can expect new interpretations within the various traditions of the symbols of those traditions. Thus there will be many new forms of feminine religiousness. Western feminist theologies of liberation will be one among the many ways in which women will come to terms with their own traditions. Religious Studies will try to keep track of all these developments and to offer some theoretical constructs for the organization of the data.

One such construct which is understood differently within theology and religious studies is tradition. (13) Religious Studies views each of the major religious systems as a cumulative tradition, that is as an on-going process by which the members of each generation select from the whole of what has gone before what seems significant to them. In this process, some elements are always being lost, some new ones added, some new emphases laid. Because each generation has the opportunity to select, on the basis of whatever pres-

asures are acting upon it, the next stage of the process is never finally predictable.

Many of the feminist theologians, on the other hand, seem to view tradition as a more fixed entity. Carol Christ in a review article on the feminist theologians divides them into revolutionaries or reformers depending on their attitudes to the Christian tradition.(14) The former see no hope for women in that tradition and insist on creating a new religion. The latter view the tradition as open to reform. The reformer Letty Russell quotes a World Council of Churches statement on tradition that seems to express her view.

The report "summarizes an ecumenical consensus that distinguishes between tradition, traditions and the Tradition. . . . In this report 'tradition' refers to the total traditioning process that operates in human history and society; 'traditions' refer to the patterns of Church life, such as confessions, liturgies, politics, etc., that have developed in each confessional church group; the 'tradition' refers to Christ as the content of the traditioning process by which God hands Christ over to men and women." (15)

This statement is a good example of rather convoluted minds at work trying to make sense of the reality of change as observed by religious

studies and the other social sciences, and the theological urge to insist that there must be something that does not change. In religious studies, we would stop at pointing out the plain fact of change.(16) Paul Van Buren writes:

The past of Christianity may be seen as a historical phenomenon, a long history of changing ideas and practices, offering answers to questions posed variously in various circumstances. . . . Christianity has been changing since its beginning; the religion of the past constantly being adapted to the conditions of each new present. Once we see this character of Christianity, we are released from the misconceived task of trying to identify its unchanging essence. . . .

It could be objected, however, that there must be some limit to the changes which could occur, beyond which we could no longer call the transformed creature by the same name. This seems to be more a logical than a historical point.

Many of the feminist theologians, however, whether they want to abolish Christianity, or reform it, still tend to think there is somewhere an 'essence.'

Mary Daly argues that feminists ought self-consciously to castrate Chris-

tianity by removing the notions of sin and salvation. (17) Rosemary Ruether urges us to "transform Christianity from a Constantinian to a prophetic religion." (18) She considers the "obsessive" preoccupation with personal sin as a perverted emphasis of the Christian tradition. She calls for a prophetic critique of alienating political, economic and social structures. Daly rejects what she sees as an intolerable essence. Ruether thinks the essence is valid; it is the practice she cannot accept. Neither is prepared to say that there is no essence.

Penelope Washbourne's beautifully written and subtle analysis of the feminine condition, Becoming Woman, says little explicitly about the Christian tradition, although Christian assumptions are implicit. (19) As a theologian, she differs notably from Daly, Ruether and Collins on the question of evil. As is the case with many enthusiastic shamanistic and prophetic reformers, the latter tend to equate evil with the old system which they feel called to overthrow. (20) Hence their visions suggest a new paradise free from ambiguity and the influx of chaotic destructiveness.

Penelope Washbourne, however, conceives of the ideal woman as a responsible adult (the image of autonomy stimulated by a notion of the tremendous freedom of the old free virgin goddesses). Such an adult, in her view, is always

capable of destruction, more especially if the crisis periods of her life are not guided by meaningful rites of passage which can enable her to make the required leaps into new being gracefully rather than demonically. Any sensitive parent who knows, as Washbourne does, that we are all capable of battering and abusing our young, will recognize the truth of her claim that we are never free of the demonic.

The Jewish feminists who produced the volume The Jewish Woman are like Penelope Washbourne in their concern for devising new and effective forms of ritual to help women cope more adequately with existence. (21) In both cases, meaningful practice is a more central concern than theology.

Carol Christ says that the feminist theologians are divided as to whether or not the core symbol of Christianity is acceptable. Mary Daly sees Jesus, a man, as that symbol and she shouts no. Letty Russell sees the symbol as an imperative to responsible concern. Rosemary Ruether emphasizes the prophetic challenge. From the perspective of religious studies, however, one would argue that because the cumulative tradition is a process, no one can predict what future generations may affirm to be the aspect of the tradition which may prove to be most significant. For example, for centuries the Caliph was a central symbol for Muslims but now the Caliph is gone. Muslims, however, continue. If we do

a structural analysis of any one slice of Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish or Muslim history we can discern a core symbol at a given point but the movement of time re-arranges the parts of the structure, and the pieces do not fit together in the same way in different periods of time, or in different places.

Carol Christ, writing in the context of Jewish symbols for women, has written an engaging tale.

One day woman spoke to God in this way:

Let us change places. You be woman, and I will be God. For only one second. . . . As woman takes the place of God, she hears what she can only describe as a still, small voice saying, 'God is a woman like yourself. She shares your suffering. She, too, has had her power of naming stolen from her. . . . As woman becomes God, the God who had existed for her only as an alien ceases to be a stranger to her. In this moment, woman realizes the meaning of the concluding words of the story, which say: The liberation of the one is bound to the liberation of the other, so they renew the ancient dialogue, whose echo comes to us in the night, charged with hatred, with remorse, and most of all with infinite yearning.

(22)

Maybe this notion will provide some core symbols for a new phase.

#### NOTES

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2. Fatima Mernissi, "Women, Saints and Sanctuaries," Signs, Vol. 3, no. 1, 1977.
3. Rosemary Ruether, Liberation Theology (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), p. 2.
4. Ninian Smart, The Science of Religion and the Sociology of Knowledge (Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 11.
5. Ibid., pp. 8-9.
6. Mary Daly, pp. 92, 94, 147.
7. Rosemary Ruether, New Woman, New Earth, pp. 5, 89-110.
8. G. Davenport, trans., Sappho: Poems of Fragments (University of Michigan Press, 1965).
9. C.F. Jacquetta Hawkes, The Dawn of the Gods (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1968).
10. Merlin Stone, The Paradise Papers (London: Virago, 1976).
11. Ninian Smart, The Religious Experience of Mankind (New York: Scribners, 1967).
12. Nancy Falk, "Alone of All Her Sex;" "The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary," by Marina Warner; "Beyond the Veil," by Fatima Mernissi; "Bengali Women," by Manisha Roy, Review Article, Religious Studies Review, Vol. 4, no. 2, April 1978.
13. W. Cantwell Smith, The Meaning and End of Religion (New York: Macmillan, 1962).
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15. Letty Russell, p. 75.
16. James Van Buren, The Edges of Language (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 13-20.
17. Mary Daly, pp. 71-72.
18. Rosemary Ruether, Liberation Theology, p. 1.
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20. C.F. Lanternari, The Religions of the Oppressed (New York: Knopf, 1963).
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22. Ibid., p. 12.