Three Perspectives in Feminist Theology

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Feminist theology, the study of God with special attention to women's experience and their struggle for equality and justice, can be approached from at least three different perspectives: feminist theology as story, as history, and as traditional concepts and categories of academic theology. Each has its strengths and weaknesses, but all together, in combination with one another, they offer us a more complete picture and understanding of feminist theology.

Four books will be referred to in this paper that exemplify the various approaches. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker tells a story of black female experience; many feminist theologians consider it a theological work. *The Color Purple* leads us through the life of Celie, the central character of this book, from her physical, emotional and spiritual bondage to her redemption. This journey is taken with the help and encouragement of a number of characters in this book. It is more than a physical journey; it is a theological one as well. *Texts of Terror*, by Phyllis Trible, approaches feminist theology from an historical vantage point, retelling the stories of four women recorded in the Bible: Hagar, who bore a son to Abraham; Tamar, King David's daughter, who was raped by her brother; an unnamed concubine who was raped and dismembered; and the daughter of Jepthah who was sacrificed because of a vow taken by her father. In the third book, *The Legend and the Apostle*, Dennis MacDonald also retells the history of early Christian women by recalling the oral tradition, stories passed down through the ages by word of mouth. According to the oral legends, some women were called to be missionaries, working and traveling with their male counterparts. *The Legend and the Apostle* deals specifically with the missionary Thecla, who traveled with Paul the Apostle. *Sexism and God-Talk* by Rosemary Ruether, a noted Catholic theologian, approaches feminist theology through the use of traditional concepts and categories of academic theology. These books, as well as many other feminist writings, at times use more than one perspective, but they tend to lean toward one of the three perspectives most heavily.

When approaching feminist theology from the imaginative viewpoint of a story, we deal with the relationship between the author, the text, and the reader. It can be diagrammed as a triangle with interplay among the three parts. The strength of storytelling is that it is by far, for the majority of people, the most entertaining method of learning about a topic—whether
it be feminist theology or something else. By their very nature, stories are written in such a way as to grab the reader’s attention and carry it to the conclusion. Readers identify with a character and feel a closeness and involvement. Any woman, black or white, can easily identify with the female characters in *The Color Purple*, momentarily placing herself in their shoes, experiencing their thoughts and emotions. In imaginative fiction the author is relatively free to express herself (himself) with freedom from external controls and standards. Alice Walker uses black dialect to add flavor, authenticity, and insight to her story, and the letter format is a unique literary form to express her characters and story.

This approach to feminist theology has its limitations, however. It is written from the viewpoint of the author. She (he) is not required to in any way justify her position nor to interject any factual “truth” into the story. It is a story, and as such a reader may assume that it requires no documentable truth, making it vulnerable to criticism. An individual reading *The Color Purple*, for example, might assume that the abuse, both physical and mental, which the characters suffered was extreme and not indicative of many black females’ experience and therefore not valid to the feminist tradition.

Another potential liability of the story perspective is the reader’s ability, or lack of ability, to interpret the story in the way the author intended. Of course, this could also be a strength in that a reader may see beyond the original intent of the author, adding an even richer meaning to the story. Even so, because each reader is free to interpret a story as she or he wishes or is capable of doing, the risk of losing the integrity of the story is always present. Feminists, committed to the creation of not just any world, but to the creation of a just world in which women have equality, are rightly concerned when the literature through which they imagine that world is so often vulnerable to cooptation, misinterpretation and/or misrepresentation.

Approaching feminist theology as history serves as a tool to reclaim women’s identity, their story, in history. Without a history (story) to tell, we are continually vulnerable to oppression and obscurity.

Phyllis Trible’s book *Texts of Terror* discusses four women from the biblical past. She retells their stories historically, noting the terror that they experienced. Their experiences of rape, incest, torture, and rejection were not exclusive, however, to that time. These experiences occur throughout history and continue in our own time. Disturbing though this history may be, it provides us with our tradition, and thus, in part, our personal identity. In order to have an identity we must have our stories told. To claim liberation, that identity must first be attained.
Another strength of the historical perspective is that women throughout history were, for the most part, invisible in religious texts and other writings. Few of the women in Trible's book are familiar biblical names. The terror that each experienced has seldom been addressed in biblical studies. In truth little has been written about women's experience within the patriarchal system. This has led people to believe that women have played no role in history. This is not true. By directing the study of feminist theology at our history, women are empowered for the present and future. We are made aware that we are not, and have never been, alone in our life experiences.

The difficulty and challenge of the historical approach is the very fact that women were written out of history and it is therefore difficult to retrace and reclaim that history. When we attempt to reclaim feminist history, so much is lost that women often feel powerless because so little of it is recorded. Thus a danger of this method is the reinforcement of the marginalization of women. There is a risk that people will presume that the history recorded is an accurate reflection of women's lives, histories and interests. Most of history was recorded from the male standpoint. Women so seldom tell their own stories that many might conclude that they had no stories to tell. This is not the case. Despite the dangers of marginalization, historical analyses that are mindful of these dangers can make important contributions to feminist theology.

For example, The Legend and the Apostle by Dennis MacDonald documents women's history in early Christian times from the oral legends of Paul the Apostle. These legends were passed down orally through the ages retelling the missionary involvement of women during early Christianity, a time when many women were equals in ministry with men. Trible's Texts of Terror also shows us that women's history (story) is there; one must but look for it.

The last perspective of feminist theology to be addressed is one which appeals to traditional concepts and categories of academic theology. The remainder of this paper will deal with this approach as used by Rosemary Ruether in her book Sexism and God-Talk, and how it compares to and contrasts with the first two approaches to feminist theology.

Ruether believes that the uniqueness of feminist theology lies in its use of women's experience. Traditional theology is based on male experience rather than on universal experience. The critical principle of feminist theology, as seen by Ruether, is the promotion of full humanity of women. The idea that males are considered the norm for authentic humanity has caused women to be used as scapegoats for sin and to be marginalized in both original and redeemed humanity.
The historical approach and theological method seem to be closely related. Ruether traces Western religious traditions and their Middle Eastern precursors. She takes her readers through the historical events which have affected and produced the male dominant church and the various areas of church thinking that affect women. Ruether delves into this area at great length to support and explain her concepts of feminist theology. Beginning by reflecting on the origins of God Language in Chapter 2 and continuing through her book, Ruether makes history an important element in her writing. Ruether, however, goes beyond historical documentation to the conceptual. She forces the reader to go beyond the historical facts to a challenging of them and the situation and system that created them.

With Sherry Ortner, Ruether attributes the subordination of women in patriarchy to men's interpretations of women's reproductive functions! Because of their reproductive role, women are perceived as part of nature, rather than culture. They have a "pre-social," even "sub-human," status. Tied to nature, women are part of that "inferior" realm. Ruether extends Ortner's analysis by tracing the historical development of the image of a male God through the Judeo-Christian tradition. Man creates God in his own image. His ego—transcendent out of nature—is matched by the transcendent image of a male Father-God (47). The underside of this transcendent male ego is the conquest of nature, imaged as the conquest and transcendence of the Mother. This thesis can easily be diagrammed as:

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GOD: as creator and ruler of the entire realm

God's nature: Rational Male
          Immortal  Ruler
          Invisible  Spirit-Soul
          Unchanging GOOD

Human Nature: Irrational Female
          Mortal  Ruled
          Visible  Body      EVIL
          Changing  Nature
          Decaying  Sexual
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Ruether believes that although the predominantly male images and roles of God make Yahwism an agent in the sacralization of patriarchy, there are critical elements in biblical theology that contradict this view of God. The "prophetic God" is on the side of the poor and oppressed. At the heart of biblical religion is found a protest against ruling class privilege and the deprivation of the poor (62). Although in the Old Testament women
were not included in that category, the New Testament included gender and class in defining the oppressed.

According to Ruether, the tradition of “liberating God” also demonstrates anti-patriarchial use of God-language. The New Testament concept of God as *Abba* (the familiar daddy or papa rather than King or Lord) seems to abolish distance and the master-servant relationship between people within the Jesus community (65). The call to “obey God rather than men” has been used by women to affirm their authority and autonomy against patriarchial authority.

The proscription of idolatry, a tradition followed by Israel, has been broken by Christianity. Ruether notes that sculpture and painting representing God as a powerful old man with a white beard have created an image in the minds of people which was never meant to be (66). This makes it difficult if not impossible for people to envision God as anything BUT white and male. (This image has served the purposes of men very nicely over the years.)

Ruether insists that there are biblical examples of an equivalent image for God as male and female. The early Christian movement included women equally in those called to study the Torah of Jesus. There are parables such as the parable of the lost coin which show male and female as equivalent images of the divine.2 Parallel male and female images do not picture divine action in parental terms (creator/created), but depict Jesus as seeker of the lost and transformer of history (redeemer) (69). We need to start with language of the Divine as redeemer, liberator, one who fosters full personhood, and then God/ess as creator, source of our being (70).

Feminist theology must reject the dualism of spirit and nature which is basic to male theology and which pits male against female. By doing all of these things the God/ess leads us to harmonization of self and body, self and other, self and world (71).

Ruether’s conceptual feminist theology is attractive, but it is not without its drawbacks. One is simply the way “theology” is written. If her concepts are to have an impact on our sexist environment, her message must be intelligible to people outside of theological circles. Fellow theologians will understand her writing, but they will not be the only ones to effect the changes necessary. In order for theology to be relevant, it must be acted out, not simply studied. It must take place in and among the people rather than in academic arenas.

Another danger of the theological approach is that it may appear at times to be elitist. Ruether states that women must develop a feminist consciousness. By reading their own history within the history of patriarchy
they can become aware of the system that has entrapped them and discover a hidden community of women of the past (184-189). This sounds well and good, but the majority of women may not have the time, money, incentive, or even interest to develop a feminist consciousness.

Ruether believes that an important step in male conversion from sexism to egalitarianism involves the willingness of men to enter into risks themselves—and a willingness to step into the shoes of women (191). Few men, however, are able or disposed to do this. Although Ruether feels these steps are important elements for developing a feminist consciousness, they may not be essential for the ultimate outcome. The enlightenment and involvement of some individuals can lead to the development of a feminist awareness for society as a whole.

While certain weaknesses in Ruether’s approach are undeniable, equally undeniable is the fact that women have suffered throughout history at the hands of men and from God imaged as male, one created by male thought. Women have accepted the male imaged God that was thrust upon them. They have viewed their role in life as less important than men’s and have accepted much suffering because of this. They have assumed responsibility for much of what goes wrong within the family structure as well as life in general.

It is time that women regain their identity and establish a relationship with a God/ess that brings them to full personhood and redemption. This requires us to understand Ruether’s thesis of a God imaged by man according to the normative image of a transcendent ego. We must then look at the nature of good and evil in a different light, one which would look quite different from the diagram Ruether limned. This can take place when we consider God as male-female in nature. By so doing we will no longer find a strong division between God’s nature and human nature. Within a theological framework this might lead to a true redemption of ALL life.

Although each perspective of feminist theology has its strengths and weaknesses, each is of importance if we are to see sexism cease and feminist theology recognized for its worth and merit for all people. The imaginative approach of feminist theology as story provides interest and an opportunity to identify closely with a character or characters, living out their stories through the telling of their life experiences. The historical perspective allows us to reclaim the struggles of women in the past. Because women were often invisible in texts and other writings we must explore women’s roles in history. The message of invisibility and marginality is not reality. Exploring feminist theology through traditional concepts and categories of academic theology enables us to better understand how theological tradition has affected women’s history and experience. It leads us along a path
which allows women to regain their identity and establish a relationship with a God/less which allows us to be open to full personhood and redemption.

When one of these perspectives is removed from the others, the picture of feminist theology is less rich and somewhat incomplete. Part of the idea is presented, a partial understanding can be grasped, but a deeper, total comprehension of sexism in our world can only be attained by exposure to the three perspectives of feminist theology.

Notes

2 Luke 15: 8-10, “Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’ Just so, I tell you there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”
Here, we see God, portrayed as an old woman who rejoices over a discovery of the lost coin with her friends, just as God in heaven rejoices with the angels over the repentance of one sinner. God, imaged as a woman, overturns expectations of male authority and hierarchy.

Works Cited


