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ANNA ABRAM

## CHRISTIAN FEMINIST ETHICS - WHAT IS IT?

This article is an introduction to the sphere of feminist ethics. Although within this sphere there exists some diversity in approach to moral problems, there are some general claims that are common to all feminism. The main issues that guide feminist ethics are: patriarchy, embodiment, relationality and experience. Making generous use of the feminist writings, I will consider these issues. Though firstly, I will present the Christian version of Feminist Ethics, with special references to Catholicism.

'Feminist Ethics' in its most general sense, refers to any ethical theory that locates its roots in feminism. In the most fundamental meaning, feminism is a conviction and a movement opposed to discrimination on the basis of gender. It opposes, therefore, any ideology, belief, attitude, or behaviour that establishes or reinforces such discrimination<sup>1</sup>. It emerges from a practical situation of injustice and aims at social and political change. Anne E. Patrick (the President of the Catholic Theological Society of America) has defined that to be a 'feminist' is to take up (1) a solid conviction of the equality of women and men, and (2) a commitment to reform society, including religious society, so that the full equality of women is respected<sup>2</sup>. This, however, requires reforming the thought systems that legitimate the present unjust social order. Hence, it is important to notice that primary tasks for feminist ethics are definitions of 'equality' and

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<sup>1</sup> See, Margaret A. Farley, *Feminist Ethics*, in Childress James F. and Mac Quarie John (eds), *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, London: SCM Press, 1986, pp. 229 - 231.

<sup>2</sup> See, *Authority, Women, and Church: Reconsidering the Relationship*, in Howell Patrick and Chamberlain Gary, (eds), *Empowering Authority*, Kansas City: Sheed and Ward.

'justice', and the elucidation of the criteria of reform. In pursuit of these, much feminist literature inspects gender difference and its relation to fundamental human equality and to a just social organization. It also examines the normative function of women's experience in challenging traditional gender roles - particularly those said to be grounded in women's 'nature' - and in projecting more egalitarian social arrangements.

### Can feminist ethics be Christian?

The answer to this question is positive. If there exists Christian ethics, then there is also a place for feminist ethics within Christianity. Many feminists find nourishment in their Christian heritage. Though they argue that the Christian Church's avowals that women and men are equal as persons are belied by its continuing promotion of distinct and hierarchically related male and female gender roles. Lisa S. Cahill points out that "evidence about women from the Bible and Tradition is inextricably coloured by patriarchal culture and must be complemented by, and even meet the final of, women's experiences of oppression, liberation, and transformative justice"<sup>3</sup>. Feminist ethicists' writings are often seen as a critical dialogue with Christian texts, teachings, and practices. There are many prominent Christian feminists, Catholic and non Catholic, who continue to challenge this. Just to mention a few as: Monica Furlong<sup>4</sup>, Ann Loades<sup>5</sup>, Elaine Storkey<sup>6</sup>, Susan Parson<sup>7</sup>, Beverley Harison<sup>8</sup>, Rosemary Radcliffe, Reuther<sup>9</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> *Notes on Moral Theology*, 1989: *Feminist Ethics*, Theological Studies, 51 (1990), p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> See, *Feminine in the Church*, London: SPCK, 1984.

<sup>5</sup> See, *Searching for Lost Coins*, London: SPCK, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> See, *What's Right with Feminism*, London: SPCK, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> See, *Feminism and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> See, *Women, Status of*, in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, op. cit., pp. 663-666.

<sup>9</sup> See, *The of Woman in the Church*, in Hastings A (ed.), *Modern Catholicism: Vatican II and After*, London: SPCK, 1991.

Elizabeth Fiorenza<sup>10</sup>, Carol Gilligan<sup>11</sup>, and already mentioned Lisa Cahil and Anne Patrick. There are also some male scholars who undertake feminist approach to ethics. Steven Barton<sup>12</sup>, Kevin Kelly<sup>13</sup>, or George Baum<sup>14</sup> belong to this group.

What exactly are the main concerns of Christian feminist writers? To present them all will be far beyond the scope of this article. However, to do justice to the reader, I will consider a few. For example, Rosemary Radford Reuther, in her writings, uses the model of dialectic between the tradition and the critical insights which arise from concrete practice. She presses social issues, such as racism, anti-Semitism, militarism, and sexism. She uncovers the ideological patterns in Christian thought which have served consistently to legitimate violence and oppression by identifying them as 'the order of creation and the will of God'. Anne Patrick highlights the social implications of gender specific appropriations of the ideal of chastity. In what she calls the patriarchal paradigm for virtue, all Christians are expected to be 'kind, chaste, just, and humble'. Yet women are expected to excel in charity and chastity', while men are trained to think in terms of justice and rights. She believes that this treatment of women is unjust and subordinative. Elizabeth S. Fiorenza points out that women as Church are invisible by patriarchal law that excludes them from Church office on the basis of sex. She refers to the fact that although the Church is called 'our mother', it is personified and governed by fathers and brothers only. Therefore, whenever we speak of the Church we see before our eyes the pope in Rome,

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<sup>10</sup> See, *Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation*, Theological Studies, 36 (1975), pp. 605-626.

<sup>11</sup> See, *In A Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> See, *Women, Jesus and the Gospels*, in Holloway R., (ed.), *Who Needs Feminism: Men Respond to Sexism in the Church*, London: SCM Press, 1980, pp. 31-42.

<sup>13</sup> See, *Moral Theology - Not Truly Human Without Full Participation of Women*, in: *New Directions in Moral Theology*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1982, pp. 86-103.

<sup>14</sup> See, "Bulletin: *The Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem*", Concilium, 206 (1988), pp. 144-149.

bishops or pastors, cardinals and monsignors, deacons and altar boys, all of whom are men.<sup>15</sup>

Many feminists find this situation oppressive and look for a more positive solution by reinterpreting the image of women in the steps of Jesus. That is why the theme 'Jesus and Women' recurs frequently in feminist ethics. Jesus is often described as the "man of feminist dreams" or an "integrated man"<sup>16</sup>. It is striking that in many biblical stories (such as about Jesus and the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Syrophenician woman) Christ does not hold the male establishment. He surprises even his own disciples. In these stories we can find that Jesus accepted not only love, kisses, tears and warmth of affection from women, but also their financial provision.

Many feminists point out that stories of Jesus imply that the qualities required for leadership and for positions of responsibility in people of God are not gender specific. They are moral and religious qualities: gifts of God's sovereign Spirit, not accidents of birth. Another interesting thing is that the harsh words Jesus spoke were never directed to women - they were for the 'powerful male establishment'. It was the religious leaders whom he called 'whitewashed tombs' and accused of hypocrisy. It was a political leader he denounced as a 'fox'. It was greedy businessman whom he called 'thiefss'. Jesus' message was that his followers were not to 'lord it over' rather, 'whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant'. "Small wonder", says Elaine Storkey, "that women loved him so much. Small wonder that after one of his disciples had betrayed him and another denied him, the women were prepared to risk everything for his sake"<sup>17</sup>. She points out that women were there at the foot of the Cross, to anoint his body, at the empty tomb, and at the Resurrection. "He was the one they knew him to be: the Redeemer, the Messiah and for us as for them he has brought liberation"<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See, *Breaking the Silence - Becoming Visible*, Concilium, 182 (1985), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> See, S. Heine, *Women and Early Christianity: Are the Feminist Scholars Right?*, London: SPCK, 1987, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> *What is Right with Feminism?*, London: SPCK: 1985, p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

Feminists are convinced that women's subordination has its roots in the stereotypical and symbolic image of woman. Woman through the history of Christianity was associated with Eve, or as Tertulian calls it, with 'the ignominy of sin' or 'the devil's gateway'. Thomas Aquinas called her an 'incidental being' or 'imperfect man'. It is only in last 50 years that woman became a theme of theological reflection. Pope John XXIII's Encyclical Letter *Pacem in Terris* is the most influential papal document, which enunciated the dignity and freedom of human persons, men and women equally. John XXIII saw women's activity in social and political spheres outside the home as a development. He spoke about rights and duties, which belong to them. He started a new line of thought, which differs greatly from other documents of the Roman Catholic Church, published after him.

Many positive statements against oppression of women can be found in the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Vatican II, but there are also numerous references presenting women in their traditional 'roles' and not in terms of their self-realization. The Apostolic Letter "Mulieris Dignitatem" of Pope John Paul II, according to some scholars, also appears to be controversial. In spite of a number of positive addresses to women, there are statements, for example, concerning differences between men and women as divinely ordained. Unfortunately John Paul II does not spell these differences out. George Baum notices that the papal saying that the "essence of womanhood is motherhood or potential for motherhood" does not correspond with a real life experience of many women<sup>19</sup>. Sadly, many women feel that their voices have been silenced. What is more, passing definite judgments about women without listening to their voice would "betray a mentality which believes that really the Church has nothing to learn from them, as though the Church no longer had need for a better understanding of the Good News"<sup>20</sup>. Christianity is not only for women or only for men, but for both women and men. And this is the message that many Christian feminists are voicing. This mes-

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<sup>19</sup> See, "Bulletin: *The Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem*", op. cit., p. 146.

<sup>20</sup> K. Kelly, *Moral Theology Not Truly Human Without the Full Participation of Women*, in *New Directions*, op. cit., p. 101.

sage of equality between men and women, within Christianity as well as within the whole society, is the concern of all feminists. In proclaiming this message feminists focus on four specific issues (patriarchy, embodiment, relationality and experience) that guide their thought. I will consider them next.

### **Patriarchy**

Feminist ethics is concerned primarily with the welfare of women, as such it opposes sex discrimination as it exists in social structures. The patriarchal system of male domination is visible mainly in the sexual division of labour, the stereotypical image of marriage and family, and violence against women. There are still many stereotypical models for each sex. Men are often said to be: intellectual, assertive, logical, strong, born leaders, competent, etc., whilst women are: emotional, intuitive, receptive, passive, beautiful, compassionate, religious, gossippy, etc.. Many feminists argue against perpetuating these false models, which hide and damage women's real qualities and cause inequalities between women and men. The major reason for these inequalities is that women's first role in life taken is to be a wife and a mother. Women were, and still are, captured in mythical symbols, which prevent them from growing fully as free persons. Regarding the violence, in times of proclamation of human rights, there is a growing problem of sexual violence, such as rape, abortion and birth control laws, involuntary sterilization, prostitution and female slavery, sexual harassment in employment, and aggressive pornography. These all sustain the patriarchal order of male dominance. The disadvantages of being born female has not been yet eliminated. For example, job segregation by sex is still a crucial factor in women's subordination throughout the world. In some countries this problem is decreasing but in others there is no visible change. Since feminist ethics aims for equality it argues for a pro-woman bias until equal status is achieved. Anti-oppression usually extends to all forms of unequal treatment and denial of humanity. Hence feminists reject any justifications for discrimination based on some order of nature or will of God.

## Embodiment

Women's bodies have a dual role of serving the woman and serving the species - to an extent greater than men. Women menstruate, incubate and lactate. As a result in some traditions women have been understood as closer to nature. The role of childbearing and rearing is also seen as natural. The body has traditionally been equated with sexuality. Women are seen to embody evil when sex is understood to be sinful (Eve). At the same time women who are chaste or virgins are placed on a pedestal (Mary). Some women who want to live up to the ideal of Mary get disappointed as biologically they cannot be both virgins and mothers, and hence they are pushed to be associated with Eve. However, embodiment is not just biological aspects of body. That is why whilst not denying the goodness of human bodiliness, feminists refuse to equate anatomy with destiny. They say that women can transcend their bodies through rational choices and are ready to accept the giftedness of their bodies. Beverly Harrison lays great stress on the importance of feeling and sensuality as essential dimensions of being human. She says that "all our knowledge, including our moral knowledge, is body-mediated knowledge"<sup>21</sup>. Human beings value the world through the ability to touch, to hear, to see it. This applies to both men and women. Hence, feminist criticism is directed against traditional differences with reproductive biology, asserting not only that women's intellectual, emotional, and social capacities are both 'natural' to women and subordinate to men. Fundamentally, feminist authors question whether the assignment of women primarily to domestic roles, and men to economic and political roles, is genuinely necessitated by human reproductive technology.

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<sup>21</sup> Cited in K. Kelly, *Moral Theology...*, op. cit., p. 102.



## Relationality

The very *raison d'être* of feminism is communal transformation. Feminist ethics is concerned not just with theory but with praxis<sup>22</sup>. Relationships should be modelled on collaboration and cooperation and not on hierarchy and competition. In human relations autonomy and individuality are equally primary, reflecting both human individuality and human interpersonal nature. Feminists oppose complementarity and role differentiation, which emphasize women's inferiority to men. They aim to reconstruct models of the person and human community. Some interesting work, relevant to this area, has been done by psychologist and social scientist, Carol Gilligan<sup>23</sup>. Reflecting on women's experience, she has helped to bring to human consciousness the core insight that the heart of moral agency lies not in individual independence but in mutual interdependence. Interdependence means more than that our decisions and the kind of person we are affect other people and other creatures. It also works in the other direction. The kind of person we are is largely determined by the influence of other people and the wider world. We are bound in the web of mutually interlocking relationships. The notion of interdependence changes the whole focus of the power relationship. A truly human exercise of power lies not in the relationship of subject-object, but in the direction of empowerment. We empower each other rather than seek to dominate over each other. We approach each other as persons bonded together in mutual dependence rather than as competitors to be vanquished in the struggle for existence. Hence, feminists oppose the duality which seeks to understand human beings in terms of: emotion/reason; body/spirit; passive/active; dependence/autonomy; helper/leader. The reason of this opposition is the fact that women have been assigned the roles that the men do not want. Feminists are concerned with reality of women's lives, and not with biological givens and a fixed order.

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<sup>22</sup>The term 'praxis' is used within Theology of Liberation, which made a significant contribution to feminist thought.

<sup>23</sup>See her, *In a Different Voice*, *op. cit.*

## Experience

Feminists turn to women's experience since male construals of their lives (identity and function) did not ring true. They do not claim that women's experience is universalisable to all human experience. But until women's experience is taken into account in ethics, the traditionally assumed universal claims based on men's experience will be inadequate and inaccurate formulations to ethics. For example, regarding the motherhood there has to be made a distinction between women's experience and patriarchal institution. In theological reflection the perception of motherhood is very significant. However, what in male-orientated theology has tended to be presented uncritically as pertaining to what would be seen as the 'nature' of womanhood is analysed much more critically by women theologians who are careful to listen to women's experience of marriage as an institution. Feminists insist that women's experience must be taken seriously into account. Women have to be listened to, because who knows more about women than they themselves. It is interesting that more and more women notice that the description that feminists give of gender stereotypes and roles tallies surprisingly with their own experience. Men too admit that these stereotypes can force them into behaviour patterns with which they feel uncomfortable. Hence there is needed the willingness to listen. But listening is not enough. Even more is needed - "a radical conversion of our way of perceiving reality"<sup>24</sup>.

## Conclusion

In order to bring the new reality of justice and equality, feminist ethicists reexamine human experience as male and female, focusing on its embodied and social character. They try to extend the moral meaning of embodiedness beyond sex - based gender roles; they challenge historical constructions of gender as oppressive to women, as culturally biased, and not demanded by natural sex differences; and they critical-

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<sup>24</sup> *Moral Theology...*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

ly combine both Christian resources and philosophical and social analysis to guide their transformative vision of more cooperative and egalitarian communities. They are creating a vision of a world without the oppression. Kelly reminds that “oppression is dehumanizing - and not just for those who are oppressed. It is also dehumanizing, perhaps even more so, for the oppressors since it is a form of blindness, an inability to recognize and live the truth. The truth that women are revealing to us today is not just about the liberation of women. It is just as much about the liberation of men and even affects the liberation of the rest of God’s creation”<sup>25</sup>. Kelly points out that women theologians have a unique way in hearing, distinguishing and interpreting the voices of women. This view is also shared by Richard McCormick, an American leading moral theologians, who says that the “emergence of feminism is one of the ‘signs of times’ of which John XXIII and Vatican II spoke. Its full effect on moral theology is probably still ahead of us”<sup>26</sup>. Hence, there is still something to look forward. The conclusions that feminists arrive at are not unique to feminists or even unique to women. This should not be surprising, since moral living is human living. Feminists are just one group of humans demanding that women’s experiences be taken into account in moral evaluations. They do not articulate principles and norms unique to Feminism; nor do they claim exclusive access to moral insight. Feminism is inclusive. This, often controversial and diverse area of ethics generally as well as Christian ethics, has much to offer by challenging women’s status in family, society and the Church and reconstituting the images, theories, and institutions which shape women’s and men’s gender identities.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> *Moral Theology, 1940–1989*, Theological Studies, 50 (1989), p. 12.