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The Liturgical Revolution of the Feminist Movement

The feminist movement is one of the spiritual revolutions which made the deepest marks in the XXth century's theological life. Its theological side is inseparable from its social and political sides, i.e. its involvement in the fights and protests against the contemporary oppressive orders—especially against those which had an impact on women.

The feminist movement taught new approaches and provided different gifts to ecumenical liturgical life through its special concerns for the transcendent and the immanent world, and for communication among all.

I. FEMALE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

Feminist consciousness came from the grief and anger that followed women's astonishment when they recognized that their personal and individual problems were structural and social, originating from the patriarchal social and political system and institutionalised violence against women.

The next step was when women, trying to find a source of comfort and empowerment in the Church, recognized that their religion contributed to their own suffering. These experiences led women to form their own base communities and place them on non-traditional feminist spiritual foundations with a commitment to liberation struggles.

The female reality's presence in the world was essential in order to find women's real place and vocation in life. Feminist theology started to work on envisioning each woman finding herself in God, both as created and as living everyday in the closeness of God.

The image of God was thus slowly clarified. Women on their journey to God discovered more and more feminine elements in God coming from both Biblical and experimental bases. The two main images which feminist liturgies introduced were *God's Motherhood* and the figure of *(Lady) Wisdom*.

God's motherhood was discovered in God's care and concern for God's children, defence of life, love, and empathy for suffering. The figure of Wisdom was prominent in the inter-testamental age and literature; and through the feminist movement this scripturally sanctioned, prominent, and powerful feminine image of the Divine was rediscovered.

This image freed liturgical thinking from imposing schematic characteristics onto women about the Christian meaning of their specificity. Wisdom is a rational principle that represents the divine order imposed on the primal chaos of the material universe.

We can realise that this Wisdom image recognises the deepest feminine characteristics in contrast to the traditional church images, which show women as creatures unable to experience and communicate faith, mysteries and God's image.

The experimental basis for this revolutionary recognition of God came mainly from taking seriously the female body with its radical growth and change, especially during menstruation and pregnancy.

The traditional image of the immutable and unchange-

able God was replaced by the vulnerable God Who is willing to change, to be transformed, and Who is growing and walking with women in their everyday life.

Christ as a male Saviour raised difficult struggles and questions. Feminists tried to define the degree of Jesus' maleness, and whether it has any role in salvation history. Through these efforts, new Christ images emerged.

The two basic ones are Jesus Christ as Mother and as Woman. The deep love, compassion, and sensitiveness of Christ, which led people to recognize their own and the little ones' dignity, find their very place in these two images.

For Gabriele DIETRICH, Jesus' womanhood found its expression even on a bodily level, emphasizing the connection between women's menstruation and Jesus' shedding of blood on the cross.

These new images of God gave real joy and strength to women by empowering them to take seriously their special values, talents and God-given gifts; their stories, own principles and spirituality.

Overemphasizing the role of women had a strong therapeutic function that prepared the way to a more balanced and harmonious vision of humanity, as in ecofeminism. The feminist movement tried to free women's spirituality from patriarchal characteristics, e.g. that women are more passive, emotional and nurturing.

These images contributed in large part to the relegation of women onto an inferior level. In response, feminist theologians searched for new acknowledgements and characteristics in connection with the purposes of women's emancipation and liberation.

II. FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

Feminist spirituality is determined by its global nature, where women from different backgrounds and levels of oppression are integrated. Its diversity is not just circumstantial, but purposefully valued by nourishing the emergence of contextual and personal stories.

As Diann NEU stated, feminists know the deep oppression that results from exclusion; therefore, they treasure and include the Other. Feminism provided place and tools for articulation of women's own will, role and desires. Women made their own gender and understanding to be the primary criterion of their life, work and spirituality.

All this gave them strength to speak for themselves in every sphere of life and to see themselves as being the Church, *ecclesiolae in Ecclesia*. Feminist spirituality created a great new atmosphere in meetings and liturgies by taking seriously all participants with their own personal stories and backgrounds.

A strong emphasis is put on women's experience: experiences of *creation*; the female body itself, giving birth, menstruation and menopause and experiences gained through *crises*; rape, divorce or domestic violence.

The uniqueness of these experiences sought some place in religious life as well. But those who thought that the realisation of these experiences was impossible within the traditional framework of church life created a special feminist type of religion.



Feminist theology found it very important to talk about *the female body*, because that was seen to be the cause of women's inferiority. Women were excluded from ministry because of their gender, and from certain spheres of liturgical life because of their menstruation.

Feminist theology valued the female body and declared it holy for worshipping. Feminist theologians invented the use of arts and dances in order to experience the beauty, goodness and wholeness of women's bodies and to make women's participation visible in liturgical celebrations.

The main topic of feminist arts is the female body, frequently shown as menstruating, pregnant, or in a process of birth-giving. It keeps the feminist emphasis on the qualities of bodylines, which can be identified as nurturance, intuition, compassion, comfortableness with sexuality, and a strong connection to nature.

Feminist spirituality also stopped looking at the question of blood as shameful or inferior, and it led others to recognize its value. The blood of life is shed, being a sign of fertility and life-giving. The discovery of the value and beauty of the female body led feminist theology to put emphasis as well on discovering God as the God of life.

The feminist movement is also characterised by its concern and existential recognition of *ecological* issues. It originated in the studies on ancient and current goddesses, who were representatives of the Earth or Nature.

They also paid proper attention to the parallels and connections that can be found between women and nature, such as their cyclical history, life-centeredness, being life-giving and life-sustaining.

There is a combination of the struggle for nature's healing and sanctification, and for the liberation of women, because the degradation of nature is considered as an extension of the degradation of women.

In the ecological concern, the feminist movement and Orthodoxy join forces. They led the rest of Christianity to take into consideration the question of creation, the role and task of humanity in nature, because unless we are at home with Mother Nature, we are short-changing the Incarnation.

Marjorie PROCTER-SMITH says that the focus of feminist spirituality is much more on wholeness than on holiness. There is a difference between a Gnostic type of spirituality and a wholeness-type, between a negative and positive image of material goods. Both of them aim at holiness, which is a communion with God; but one finds it through the rejection of body, the other through the involvement of body into worship.

III. LITURGICAL REVOLUTION

The presence of God and the community, as women experience them in traditional worship services, could be articulated in traditional forms. These forms, however, often do not have the strength and possibilities to express women's experiences.

This problem might have been the main cause which generated the liturgical revolution led by women. The primary aim of this liturgical revival was to bring into realisation and to value women's own faith *expression forms*, which was an essential part of worshipping God.

Women had to proclaim themselves a visible sign of the Church. The feminist liturgical movements tried to express women's self-awareness, thus completing the process of empowerment.

They encouraged women's *active involvement* in liturgical life. Feminist liturgical materials were collected and produced from all over the world. In creating, shaping and leading liturgies, women became not only active participants, but also subjects of liturgy.

The feminist movement used various liturgical and literary forms, rediscovered and created alike. Maintaining the balance between tradition and freedom creates questions and a constant tension in liturgical revolutions. Looking at feminist liturgies, we can say that they treated the *traditional liturgical forms* in a free way, with little obedience but great imagination.

1. LANGUAGE

The feminist liturgies had their most revolutionary result in the field of liturgical language. Liturgical language which uses female images and expressions for God was almost totally missing before.

The language used in theological life was examined and changes were invented in *grammar* and expression forms to be inclusive. It developed in order to express women's participation and role in the worshipping community, avoiding the use of one-sided patriarchal language.

The new expressions cleansed religious language from categorising women with sexually-based criteria, which created divisions among women as well. This language is one of the greatest strengths of the renewal, because it envisions and keeps the various feminist movements together.

It also enables the feminist movement to be ecumenical and even interreligious by claiming that the biggest obstacle to humanity is not in denominational or religious divisions, but in the gender exclusiveness of patriarchy.

2. TEXTS

Language did not stop at the level of expressions, but it led to thinking through the meaning and value of *literature*. In the liturgical field this brought a revolutionary break with the absolute use of Biblical and patriarchal texts.

Feminist liturgies involved Biblical stories about women into the lectionary, and the reflections dealt mainly with women's issues. They rediscovered the Bible stories about the foremothers and filled them with message and gospel.

Although these Biblical women had not received proper attention until then, they were now recognised as essential participants in God's salvation history for God's people and examples of faith for today.

The feminist movement revised the liturgical recollection of women by women, leading to the emergence of two liturgical forms: first, story-telling, because it can provide a powerful expression of taking the individual seriously. And secondly, litany, because it calls to memory saints and past events, enabling the realisation of the universal Church. It gives also new meaning and importance to the quest for holiness.

The feminist movement also involved literature in its totality into liturgical life. Women discovered



the importance of using poetry, drama and fiction, both in form and language. Literature had its strength in its aesthetic and basis, which was the *symbolism* both in content and language.

Their rediscovery was necessary because women's experiences were deep and painful, getting stuck at the level of a silent cry. Articulation for recognition and healing could happen only through symbolism.

3. MOVEMENTS AND SYMBOLISM

Paying attention to the body was an urgent need, both on theological and spiritual levels. The feminist liturgies involved wonderful and expressive rituals, rites, dances, and movements as effective tools of worshipping God through women's bodies.

Feminist liturgies rediscovered also the importance of symbols as parts of the common human heritage, and as tools of communication and experience. The concentrated use of these elements gave special intensely symbolic, bodily characteristics to feminist liturgies.

4. BLESSING

Various, alternative blessing formulas emerged and were used. The feminist principle of blessing provided a new experience for the ecumenical movement. It broke with the idea that blessing comes only through the ordained minister.

Feminists were convinced that blessings should be participatory both in word and gesture, because they are symbols

of *common* need. They lose their authenticity when the leader uses a second person pronoun (you) instead of an inclusive one ("May God bless us").

The most preferred form is when the community gathers in a circle for blessing and holds each other's hands. It physically represents equality among the participants, connectedness, sharing, and it makes one more aware of the uniqueness of others. Experiencing the flowing energy from palm to palm, the power of blessing can be more strongly felt.

The feminist movement has left a great mark on ecumenical liturgical life. It realised the primary necessity of an *inner liberation* from the internal and external slaveries that were experienced in the society and in the Church.

It has sought to make fundamental changes not only on the practical, physical and identical, but also on the *intellectual* level. It became a *global* phenomenon that continues to leave its mark on all the various theological schools, as well as the ecumenical movement.

Suggested Reading

CARMODY Denise L., *Christian Feminist Theology*. Oxford, 1995.

KYUNG Chung Hyun, *Struggle To Be the Sun Again*. Orbis Books, 1990.

Spiritual Traditions for the Contemporary Church. Nashville, 1990.

With Passion and Compassion. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, 1988.

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Pablo ROMO CEDANO

Cleaning Up Our Memory

Contemporary theologies, especially contextual ones, tell us about subjects that appear in history in a very specific way. We see the poor in Latin America in the late '70s; feminist theologies and women as a revolution in history and as the face of God.

NEW THEOLOGICAL SUBJECTS

Hand in hand in time and strength we recognize black theologies, from the blackness, and the black God that wants no one to be slave any more and wants to love with a new dance. In the '80s we find theologians who include homosexuals (lesbians and gays) as a part of the great history of salvation and recover the gay tenderness and energy in God's infinite love.

Latin American indigenous peoples come in the end, with their indigenous theologies, making space from the "forgotten corner of Christianity." These theologies recover the God Who prepares Heaven and Earth for everyone and Who breaks the language of the purely rational to open for us a "new face and a new heart."

At the very end of the millennium, from the Christian progressive side, theologians—women and men—asked themselves about "all the others, women and men" who had not been included: those who are not Christian, those who are looked at by God with love and who have not been taken into account by us.

Those with whom we have lived, those with whom we live and those we have not seen—with them we launch the search for interreligious dialogue. The second half of the XXth century leaves us as a legacy those newly "discovered" actors, who now make part of the mosaic that unveils God's face.

GOD IS LOVE, HERE AND NOW

Always, speaking of God has meant for the theologies of Jesus Christ and for other theologies, speaking about love. Identifying Love with God is a constant reflection in Christianity, and the most evident and clear of all theologians is Saint John: "God is Love."

This is why it is necessary to contextualize love here and today. We talk about God when we liberate, when we include, when we break slavery, when we accept the different, when we come together and when we live in peace with the other—the one who does not believe in the same way as I do.

Contextualizing love is making God present in our lives, pushing us to an action of "transformative compassion." The one who loves knows that the sides of love vary in a dynamic that unveils human vulnerability: a heart beating in diverse moments of life.

God does not make Godself present in the same way for everyone always. God is personal. The hieratic of a God Who contemplates from the Pantocratic image without

