

## Background

Until the early 19th century most intellectual and theological endeavours proceeded from a prefeminist perspective. Women's experience, *as women's experience*, was not perceived as relevant to intellectual pursuits. Women were part of "mankind" and as such remained invisible. The awakening of a feminist consciousness probably first occurred noticeably in the United States of America. Women, *as women*, started to take part actively in the religious sphere. Sarah Grimke highlighted the masculine bias of biblical interpretation; Antoinette Brown who studied theology at Oberlin College in 1837, examined Paul's epistles with feminist questions and in the 1890's Elizabeth Cady Stanton together with a committee of 20 women wrote commentaries to expand the interpretative framework of those major passages in the Bible which referred to women, resulting in the Women's Bible.(1) Elizabeth Schussler - Fiorenza finds that Elizabeth Cady Stanton outlined two critical insights for feminist theological hermeneutics (Fiorenza 1984:7). Firstly, she perceived that the Bible is not a "neutral" book but a political weapon against women's struggle for liberation and, secondly, she saw that the Bible is not just misunderstood or badly interpreted but that it is patriarchal and androcentric.(2)

In the 20th century women's studies appeared as part of the academic curriculum. Women's studies stressed the need to include what had been left out - that part of history that is women's which, though different to men's, needed to be added so that together his-story and her-story could present a more complete picture. Women's studies, an interdisciplinary venture, tended at first to be remedial, but ultimately resulted in expanding the body of knowledge and of raising women's consciousness.(3)

It was this raised feminist consciousness that paved the way from women's studies to feminist studies and then to feminist theology. According to Zikmund, two things happened:

. . . first, the new material and methods cultivated in women's studies became the basis for a critique of past assumptions and paradigms. Enthusiasm about new knowledge turned into critique of old knowledge. Second, a feminist critical consciousness, in relationship with other liberation movements, began to shape an entirely new interpretative framework.(4)

Feminist theology arises from the historical reality of sexism in human society. Sexism, according to Rosemary Ruether, is "gender privilege of males over females".(5) It is almost a cliché to say that the subjugation of women is the oldest form of oppression. However, when the private and corporate pain of sexist oppression is reflected on critically and systematically in the light of faith, feminist theology is born.(6)

## Different Streams in Feminist Theology

There is, however, no one feminist theology. As is the case for all theologies, context as well as cultural and religious traditions play their roles. In broad terms, however, two distinct tendencies surface in western feminist theology. They have been described as exclusive and inclusive. In the former sexism is the key to all social oppression, while the latter views sexism as one of the structures of oppression, recognising that, for instance, racism and classism are also oppressive.(7) Sallie McFague describes these two streams as revolutionary and reformist.(8) Before attempting to deal with their differences it is necessary to note that all feminist theologians agree on at least one issue: the patriarchal model for doing theology, developed and maintained over almost two thousand years can no longer be tolerated.(9) Differences arise as to strategies to deal with this model and as feminist theology has few, if any, traditions to fall back on, it would be true to say that it is characterised at this moment by diversity. Another issue on which most feminists agree, be they revolutionary or reformist, is

the central role of experience in their theologising. In this regard, Ruether, who would fall in the reformist camp, says that the tendency to treat the use of experience as unique to feminist theology and to see it as distant from the “objective” sources of truth of classical theologies, is based on a misunderstanding of the experimental base of all theological reflection. She maintains that what have been called the objective sources of theology, scripture and tradition, are themselves codified human experience and that human experience is the starting point and the ending point of the hermeneutical circle. Feminist theology draws on women’s experience which, according to Ruether, has almost entirely been shut out of theological reflection in the past.(10)

### **Revolutionary Feminist Theology**

Revolutionary feminists are those who feel that the Judeo-Christian tradition, which purports to speak of the human experience of God, has in fact been created by men for men and that it speaks to them and not to women. Its symbols, language and paradigms are in fact so hopelessly patriarchal that its very essence is a denial of an integrated self-concept for women and it should therefore be abandoned.(11) There are several varieties of revolutionary feminist theology. One of the more interesting is the “Goddess religion” of which Naomi Goldenberg, Carol Christ and Mary Daly are exponents. They agree “that a female deity or divine principle is necessary if women’s experience is to be included in a religious world view”.(12) The mention of a Goddess religion may well sound bizarre to many and I would agree with McFague that one of its basic difficulties is that it is anachronistic. Goddess religion is agrarian in nature and thrived in cultures prior to the male-dominated ones we now know. It has not survived in our urban world.

The writings of these feminist theologians can however, not be dismissed lightly. Apart from their obvious erudition, they should also be read as a great cry of pain and anger against the destructiveness of patriarchy to women at every level of their beings physical, emotional, spiritual, political and cultural.” They are also immensely creative in their ability to present new thought patterns in language and terms hitherto not used. A prime example is Mary Daly’s *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaphysics of Radical Feminism*, an innovative philosophical work which illustrates how male scholarship and language have “erased” women from consciousness.

### **Reformist Feminist Theology**

According to McFague, reformist feminist theologians “believe that the root-metaphor of Christianity is human liberation, not patriarchy, and that liberation for women can occur within the Christian paradigm”.(14) This is, as she remarks, a “bold faith” for it does not have a great deal to support it at first glance. Here feminist theology finds its place within the contemporary theologies of liberation which have emerged from the so-called Third World. The heart of the Christian gospel is seen as containing within it the need for human liberation which will be manifested in a new human-divine relationship in a new just order.

Feminist theologians who may be termed reformist include, among others, Letty Russell, Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, Phyllis Treble, Sallie McFague, Catharina Halkes and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel. They too, however, differ in emphases which becomes apparent when their hermeneutics are examined.

I choose to work within the reformed or inclusive model of feminist theology in which liberation is a key concept.(15) Despite its emphasis on women’s experience, it is not exclusivistic by nature, and seeks liberation and a new vision for all of humanity. It also finds its roots in the radical impulse of biblical faith.

## **Feminist Liberation Theology**

As liberation theology opened up a new context for theology with its concern directed at praxis, women articulated the need for liberation from sexist oppression. They realised that oppression is multi-dimensional and that oppression occurs not only in the church but also in the social, political and economic spheres. It is not surprising, therefore that feminist liberation theology takes as its point of departure the acceptance of the equal human worth of all in a just society. The views of three leading exponents of feminist liberation theology, Rosemary Ruether, Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza and Letty Russell demonstrate how they approach feminist liberation theology.

Ruether defines her approach as follows: "The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive . . . The uniqueness of feminist theology is not the critical principle, full humanity, but the fact that women claim this principle for themselves."(16)

Ruether is a prolific writer and a fine classical scholar who established her theological reputation before she began to apply herself to the feminist perspective. Her definitive work on feminist theology is *Sexism and Godtalk*, described by Harvey Cox as "one of the most important theological books of this or any other season".

Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, a New Testament scholar, defines her approach as follows: "Feminism is not just a theoretical world view or perspective but a women's liberation movement for societal and ecclesial change. Likewise patriarchal oppression is not identical with androcentrism or sexism . . . [it is] a social-political system and societal structure of graded subjugations and oppressions . . . Therefore a critical feminist theology of liberation does not speak of male oppressors and female oppressed, of all men over and against all women but about patriarch as a pyramidal system and hierarchical structure of Society and church in which women's oppression is specified not only in terms of race and class but also in terms of marital status."(17)

In any situation in which women suffer the injustice of oppression in patriarchal structures, feminist liberation theology remains first and foremost a critical theology of liberation. It explores women's experiences of struggling for liberation particularly in biblical religion, while at the same time articulating an alternative vision of liberation.(16)

Lastly Letty Russell wrestles with the implications of the praxis of freedom for women. While affirming the biblical basis for her theology, she sees the need for a paradigmatic shift in our move away from what she calls "the pyramid of domination" in our theology and church life to one of partnership. Woman can no longer be the "outsider" or "the other" but must share with men as participants in a common journey to discover the meaning of life and ministry in Christ. The paradigm then shifts from one of authority over community to authority in community.

## **Tasks**

1. Summarise the different approaches
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each approach?
3. Which approach do you prefer and why?