

formulation of it were attempted, would appear wildly utopian. But what there is in an intense way is courage, solidarity, a thirst for justice, an ability to celebrate, love and respect and plenty of struggle and suffering. And in that struggle the Gospel has come alive for countless thousands, oppressed people have found a dignity denied them for centuries and have learned to be able to hope again. To be a Christian has become a sign of contradiction to this present age and a cause of persecution once again.

Genesis and Patriarchy: Part II

Women and the End of Time

Angela West

In a previous article, (*New Blackfriars* Jan 1981) I argued that the eschatological interpretation of biblical theology is, ultimately, the only possible site for the creation of a feminist discourse. To put it in more assimilable terms: the contradiction of being a woman and a feminist is only finally resolvable in the context of Christian eschatology. This is rather a large claim, so I shall try to substantiate it.

The Findings of Feminist Anthropologists

Most theology hitherto has been based on an essentially androcentric perspective as a result of the fact that it is founded on an essentially androcentric anthropology. In recent years, attempts have been made by some anthropologists to bring an alternative perspective to bear on the material of their discipline: thus, Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, the editors of a recently published collection of essays by a number of female anthropologists¹ state in their introduction that the aim of the book is to 'demonstrate the importance of women's lives for our understanding of the human record'. I think it is important to consider what implications their conclusions, and those of other feminist scholars, have for non-androcentric theology, for a feminist hermeneutics.

At first sight, their conclusions wouldn't seem to be very comforting to feminists. 'The current anthropological view draws on the observation that most and probably all contemporary societies, whatever their kinship organisation or mode of subsistence, are characterised by some degree of male dominance'.² And further on they say '... although the degree and expression of female subordination vary greatly, sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of life'. This means in practice that in all societies, male, as

opposed to female activities are always recognised as predominantly important, and all cultural systems give authority and value to the role and activities of men. Men are always the locus of cultural value – hence the universal fact of male authority. Female power, while it certainly exists, is generally considered illegitimate. Women who exercise power are seen as deviants, manipulators or at best exceptions.

Thus man, as a category opposed to women, has social value and moral worth, and the ritual order of societies frequently reflects this, marking women as inferior in morality and knowledge. Most Christian theology and its sacramental embodiment, is entirely typical in this respect. In socio-structural terms, the opposition between public and domestic spheres provides the basis for this male/female polarity and asymmetry. Men's status is based on differentiation and achievement, whereas women are seen as wives, mothers, sisters – theirs is an ascribed status, and is derived from their stage in the life cycle, their biological function and their relations with men. They typically represent the private and domestic sphere of society, and hence the private nature of women's traditional discourse. They have tended to be associated with the intuitive, expressive mode since their lives are considered irrelevant to the formal articulation of the social order. At the economic level too, the public/domestic asymmetry is a general feature, as it is in all other forms of social organisation. Women's role in production is relatively domestic, their orientation more particularistic; advanced capitalist society, say the authors, though extreme in this respect, is not unique.

The 'pan-cultural' fact of female subordination presents the anthropologists with a problem (as it does theologians also, as I shall argue). For these anthropologists, it is the problem of explaining how it is that social groups, which change radically through time, continue to produce and reproduce a social order dominated by men. In this book Sherry Ortner's article,³ 'Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?' is the one that engages most radically with this question. She observes that women in cultures right across the board are apparently being identified with something that every culture devalues, that is with nature. The universality of ritual, she says, betokens an assertion in all human cultures of the specific human ability to act upon and regulate rather than passively move with and be moved by the givens of natural existence. Every culture asserts that the proper relations between human existence and natural forces depend on culture's employing its special powers to regulate the overall processes of the world and life. Purity and pollution concepts, to be found in one form or another in most cultures, are a primary example of this. Hence culture is

everywhere seen as distinct from and superior to nature. And since women's bodies make them more involved with species life, they are seen as being more 'natural' and less 'cultural' than men, whose physiology makes them freer for projects of culture and transcendence from which women tend to be excluded. And in reflecting on 'woman's near universal unquestioning acceptance of her own devaluation' Ortner reaches the conclusion that 'as a conscious human, and member of culture, (woman) has followed out the logic of culture's argument and reached culture's conclusion along with men'.

However, the matter doesn't rest there. For women, whatever their association with nature, are unquestionably creatures and creators of culture along with men, and their 'membership' and fully necessary participation in culture is fully recognised by culture and cannot be denied. This then is the locus of a contradiction, or tension in women's position in society, and it is in this contradiction, I suggest, that feminism has its roots and around which, I would argue, all feminist theory must be based.

Is Patriarchy the 'eternal' form of Human Culture?

It is this contradiction that Juliet Mitchell, another feminist theorist in the field of psychoanalysis, appears to be confronting in her work. In her book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*,⁴ she attempts to demonstrate that any realistic feminist analysis must be based on Freud's myth of the unconscious and the analysis he derives from it. For feminists, this has been quite a startling claim, when it is realised that Freud's myth of the unconscious commits us to an understanding of civilisation that is manifestly and perpetually patriarchal. But as we have seen, this is amply confirmed by the evidence of the anthropologists. As Mitchell has convincingly argued, we cannot deny the existence of the realm of the unconscious which is also the realm of myth, ideology and 'the eternal'. Yet its acceptance would seem to imply the revelation of patriarchy as the 'eternal' form of human society. 'No society has yet existed' she says 'for the 'eternal' unconscious to shed its patriarchal nature'. Yet at the same time, she advocates political struggle to change this eternal nature of things. 'Patriarchal ideology, like capitalism' she says 'is in the slow death throes of its own irrationality, and it is woman who stands at the heart of the contradiction under capitalism'. The specific struggle against patriarchy requires a cultural revolution. 'When capitalism is overthrown, new structures will gradually come to be represented in the unconscious. It is the task of feminism to insist on their birth'. By insisting that we engage in political struggle to change the unchangeable features of human society, she indicates a vision of the future that requires us to live as if a revolution in 'the eternal' were possible. In theo-

logical terms, this means to live as if the End-time can be present in history. It is an eschatological mode of thinking, and one that has much in common with the recently-developed political theology.

The common ground of feminist psycho-political analysis and political/liberation theology

For many people on both sides, no doubt, there would seem to be no connection whatever between the concerns of feminist politics and psychoanalysis on the one hand, and of political theology and Christian eschatology on the other. But I am suggesting that there is an important link that can be made and interpreted. It is such interpretation that is, I believe, the basis of the theological task; if theology is to be faithful to its proper concern, that is the knowledge of God, it cannot afford to remain hung up on its 'own' questions – claiming for itself at once too much and too little – but must 'go into all the world' of other languages which are attempting to make sense of reality and enlighten the struggle. The establishment of connections with other disciplines is then, part of the necessary work of theology. As the anthropological evidence suggests, from time immemorial human societies, from the simple to the more complex, have manifested asymmetrical differentiation between male and female, and the devaluation of the latter, which has almost invariably been reflected in the ritual and religio-political systems of the culture. Likewise, if not from time immemorial, at least from very early on in the history of man and woman-kind, it can be shown that divisions occurred in the fabric of human society whereby certain sections of that society gained an ascendancy over the rest; and this origin and perpetuation of class society has also been well-nigh universally reflected in the religio-political systems of most societies. Now the question for Christian theologians is this: are they content that Christianity should be understood as just one religion such as these, where religious structures and practices are the ritual representation at the ideological level of these class/gender relations at the social level? Or are they prepared to defend and substantiate the claim of Christianity to be the final revelation that transcends and comprehends all human history, in which all dominations shall cease, even those within nature itself, ('The lion shall lie down with the lamb' . . . Isaiah 11: 6-9) and in which the 'law' of all existing human cultural structures is superseded by the salvation that is to be found only in Christ?

My reading of the work of certain modern theologians inclines me to think that they are answering the latter question in the affirmative. Moltmann, in his book *The Crucified God*, recapitulates the work of E. Peterson thus:

“. . .with the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, escha-

tology and the struggle for freedom of the church in the Christian state, Christian theology made a fundamental break with all political religion, and its ideology in political theology. Christian faith can no longer be misused to justify a political situation. The theological and politico-religious systems are fundamentally separate. The new 'political theology' and 'political hermeneutics' presuppose the early church's criticism of the political theology of political religions. But they become more radical when they seek to reclaim from the biblical tradition the awareness of a trial between the eschatological message of Jesus, and social and political reality.

"Salvation, the object of the Christian faith in hope, is not private salvation . . . its proclamation forced Jesus into a mortal conflict with the public powers of his time . . . This 'publicness' cannot be retracted or dissolved, nor can it be attenuated . . . *Every eschatological theology*, therefore, must become a political theology, that is a (socio-) critical theology." ⁵

And Jon Sobrino in his book, *Christology at the Crossroads*, says: "Eschatology presents the problem of God in a new light, pointing up his relationship to the future as a mode of his own being. Insofar as temporal comments on God are concerned, the emphasis must be shifted from the genesis of time, to the future. The definitive revelation of God will take place at the end of time, and thus the whole temporal process is important in the revelation of God".⁶

But what does all this have to do with Juliet Mitchell and her understanding of psychoanalysis and feminist politics? She does not use or have any use for God-language; however, I think it is possible to see this part of her work as an attempt to formulate a vision of 'public salvation' – a kind of socio-critical theology that is eschatological in its orientation towards the future. In the course of her book, she moves through a consideration of the genesis of time (i.e. the genesis of human culture expressed in the myth of the Oedipus complex) to a picturing of a human future that would represent a total and radical break with all forms of culture known to humanity hitherto, thus destroying the present state of the 'eternal'.

Thatcher: parody of equality: the discomfoting logic of feminist political struggle and its fundamental dilemma

Now political struggle that has such an end as this as its ultimate goal would seem, to put it mildly, to be a formidable task for anyone, and it is clear that Mitchell has assigned women, and more especially feminists, a rather important role in this revolution that is to change the hitherto eternal form of patriarchy. At this point, it seems necessary to ask – in what sense do feminists represent all

women in this matter; are they in some sense representative of women as a whole? Or, to put it another way, which is in effect to ask a somewhat different question – in what sense *can* feminists represent all women in such an undertaking? At first sight, these questions might not seem to have any connection with theology, but as I hope to show later on, they contain an important analogy for Christians.

Let us look at the first question: do feminists represent all women? If we give a sociological answer to this question then it is fairly clear that they do not. Feminists are usually western, largely middle class women who are concerned to establish equal rights for women and to reduce the extent to which being female in a patriarchal society is a handicap. At the simplest level, one could say it's about jobs for the girls. And this of course, is a most legitimate and important aim – more jobs for the girls, I say, and only the best is good enough for them – all of them.

However, there is a problem about identifying the struggle for women's liberation with the politics of equal rights. For if feminists are to take literally as their task the liberation of *all* women, they will have to reckon with the actual situation of the vast majority of women in the world, for most of whom equal rights legislation is largely irrelevant. Their situation is expressed in one of the reports submitted to the World Conference of Women in Copenhagen last year, quoted by Jill Tweedie in *The Guardian*, July 1980: "Women" it says "constitute half the world's population, perform nearly two-thirds of its work hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income, and own less than one-hundredth of the world's property". In the face of these circumstances, it is clear that feminism based solely on the rights and privileges of an already privileged minority seeking to extend and secure their niche within patriarchal society is irrelevant to the general liberation of women, and is premised on a false notion of equality. In his encyclical *Octagesima Adveniens* (Social Problems) Pope Paul VI endorsed the struggle for equal rights for women, and an end to discrimination against them, but also took the opportunity to warn against what he called 'false equality which would deny distinctions laid down by the Creator'. Now whereas it is not exactly usual for feminists to cite the Pope as an authority in support of their arguments, it may be that what he intended by this remark does not exhaust the meaning that can be derived from it. As Clare Prangley said, in the course of an Oxford Women's Theology group scrutiny of this passage, "Maggie Thatcher is a prime example of false equality". Certainly as far as jobs for the girls are concerned, she seems to have cracked it. Coming from a middle-class tradesman background, she married the wealthy Dennis Thatcher and

emerged into the professions of law and politics to rule the roost of government with the aid of a Cabinet of ex-public schoolboys. Her social climb is complete; and the fact that this grocer's daughter made good (if that's what you call it) has not done a great deal for, say, working class mothers in the tenements of Liverpool, or in the slums of Belfast, clearly isn't what is most significant about her in the public mind. It is rather that she confirms the myth that anyone – and now, lo and behold, even any woman – by practising those old-fashioned virtues of self-help, hard work, independence, self-improvement and piety, of which she is a product, can ultimately make it to the top like her. She has become the living embodiment of 'equal opportunity' – and in the process has provided a ghastly parody of the aims and objectives of equal rights feminism.

Significantly, it is not only feminism that she parodies with such devastating effect, but also Christianity. She has begun to turn to the Bible to demonstrate the rightness and soundness of her economic policies, and even to preach them quite literally from the pulpit. As John Atherton says, in his 'Theological Critique of Thatcherism'.⁷ "What is so fundamentally objectionable about the Prime Minister's interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan is not that her perspectives so dwell on the significance of the Good Samaritan's bank balance . . . it is rather that in so doing she has reduced the self-sacrificial, heedless sin-bearing love of agape to the defective economics of Milton Friedman. She has reduced the glory of man to the miserableness of the petit-bourgeoisie'. One could comment, of course, that it's high time the glory of man was a bit reduced, but unfortunately she's also thoroughly reduced and betrayed the glory of women – and this has serious implications for feminism, that is for feminism conceived of as equal rights struggle, just as it does for the idea of Christian love as limited to 'charity'. It may help to account for the deepseated reservation that many women have about adopting a feminist position – why they feel that feminists do not in fact represent them as women – any more than Thatcher represents the advancement of women as a whole. They see in feminist aspirations, whether consciously or not, a quest for enhanced personal status of individual women, and consider it to be culturally inferior to their traditional association with and responsibility for the life of the species.

The Redemption of feminism and/or a feminist understanding of Redemption

If feminists are no more than such a group, seeking to advance the status of women as individuals, it is difficult to resist the conclusion made by some socialists, that feminism is just another variety

of petit bourgeois politics. As such it is seen by them as a diversionary tactic from the real concern of politics which is class struggle. It has, as we saw, already become 'unnecessary' from a liberal point of view, since Thatcher has 'proved' that equality of opportunity has finally arrived. Thus the central dilemma of feminist politics is exposed; within the context of contemporary political categories, it appears to be doomed to irrelevance. In these circumstances, one may ask, does feminism have any future? Can it be redeemed – from irrelevance?

On the subject of redemption, the Bible is normally considered to be a primary source . . . and I shall take the opportunity here of referring this question to its authority. With things that seem to be nearing the end, it is sometimes a good thing to go back to the beginning; so returning for a moment to the Garden, and a second look at Genesis, we may raise once again the question of equality. Given that we have found some good reasons for working with the notion of 'false equality', there still remains to be dealt with a deep-seated feminist conviction that, at a very real level, equality is indeed the genuine symbol of what is to be communicated.

It is clear from the text (Gen. 2:23) that the original equality of Eve and Adam is one of stuff, not of status; they are made of the same stuff – 'flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone': the question of status does not arise till after the Fall. This does not mean, as it has so often been taken to mean, that women should therefore rest content with inferior status: it is rather to point out that human status, whether gender based or any other, forms no part of the original creation; and this original creation pictured here in Genesis, we need to remember, was for its authors a vision of redeemed creation projected into the past. If we are not to use Genesis purely as a legitimating myth for a new status quo, but do justice to its essentially eschatological character, then we must understand the text in relation to its authors and their particular historical context. The authors of Genesis, that is the redactors of the text in its final form, were representatives of that undistinguished little Near Eastern people who had been exiled in Babylon after the collapse of their kingdom whose autonomy had never been very firmly established. During the 6th century B.C. the exiles were allowed to return to their homeland and rebuild their city Jerusalem. But the restoration was not a success, and they returned to the characteristic pattern of their history – the inability to establish effective political autonomy. As Tim Radcliffe says,⁸ "Israel was never again to be more than an insignificant little province of other people's empires". He goes on to say, "It was this failure that brought about the final transformation of her identity, the birth of Judaism". For in exile, the time of their dispossession,

they had found a way of re-possessing their history. They had gathered together, edited and re-interpreted the ancient traditions of their society; they had re-told the story of themselves as a landless, wandering people whose prophet Moses brings them within sight of the land that had been promised, and gives them the law – the law which is at the basis of their covenantal relationship with their God Yahweh. And this law, embodied in the collective text which marks their entry into history, becomes canonised as the basis and foundation of their distinct historical identity. Their hopes for the realisation of a new nation state had proved disastrous, but the creation of the Torah meant that they were beyond political annihilation. As James Sanders says, quoted by Tim Radcliffe:⁹ “Through the Torah, Israel passed from a nation in destitution to a religious community in dispersion which could never be destroyed . . . Sinai which we never possessed, was that which we could never lose”.

The transformation of the historical identity of a people by the creation of a collective text that forms the basis of their religious community is an analogy that may have more relevance for feminists than is immediately apparent. In order to explore it, we need to return to the question of how feminists represent women as a whole in the struggle for the liberation of women. As we saw, they do not in any sociological sense, represent the majority of women at all; being mainly educated middle-class women who are thus deeply imbued with competitive, hierarchical and individualistic norms of capitalist and patriarchal society, they are likely to have cut loose or been expelled from the secure but inferior place in the kinship structure of this society that most women continue to occupy. They are thus, in one sense, alienated rather than in solidarity with most women. Yet at the same time they have not, nor are they likely to gain a secure place within the patriarchal hierarchies where their presence and participation will nearly always be seen as token rather than real. Their position is a marginal one; and though there is a sense in which the position of all women can be said to be marginal to the political culture of a society, this marginality is enhanced in the case of feminists; they are the locus of a double ambiguity, literally a ‘no-man’s land’; This state of being dis-owned and dispossessed (i.e. not owned or possessed) in patriarchal culture is comparable to a state of exile. And exile, as the Israelites discovered, is an eminently suitable place from which to undertake a critical assessment of the inheritance of one’s culture. . . The creation of their text emerged not so much from the writing and inventing of new stories, but from the redaction and re-interpretation of tales and traditions that they inherited. Similarly, I suggest, that it is one of the essential tasks of feminist

discourse – the full achievement of which would constitute a political practice – not so much to invent new, and purely feminist texts (whatever they might be) but to reclaim what is already ours – the national and patriarchal myths of which the history of our race and culture is composed. For most history as we know it is the history of the ruling classes, and it is, as Terry Eagleton says,¹⁰ ‘only ever textually available to us’. It is our task now to subject this text to redaction and critique in such a way as to make room for the repressed history of the world – whether in the form of socialist and feminist historians, or the liberation of the voices of Third World women and all the disadvantaged they represent, or simply the forgotten memories of our mothers. In reclaiming history in this way, we enter it ourselves, as we must do if we are not to remain prisoners of ideology and ‘the eternal’. As Jill Tweedie said, reporting on the World Conference of Women in Copenhagen, “The sad conclusion seems to be that if there is to be any gain at all for women, it is in the explosion of the myths about their lives, as those lives deteriorate”. The explosion of such myths that govern contemporary society forms the basis for the precise socio-critical task for feminists at this particular historical juncture. And this task, that marks a new point of historical departure for feminists, also marks the point of historical juncture with the traditional task of Christian discipleship; for I would argue that it has always been the specific task of Christians to explode the myths of contemporary society (though it is perhaps relatively seldom that Christian theology has addressed itself to this task). For it is in the nature of the redeemed community that Christ presented and presents, that it is marginal to and represents a critique of all existing human culture in the name of the Kingdom that is to come.

Genesis as Eschatology: Paradigm for a liberating discourse

I have attempted to show that politically and socially feminists’ existence is in a critical condition; and the only way for us to survive the condition is to discover the full critical scope of our position as both destiny and vocation. Thus feminists can represent what is characteristic in the position of all women – their structural marginality – and by electing to represent it, can transform it into a vocational marginality, which is, as I understand it, a necessary foundation for Christian discipleship. Such a vocation is historically specific. And just as it is necessary to see the feminist ‘vocation’ as arising out of particular historical circumstances, in which women are afforded the possibility of a historical identity for the first time, so also it is possible and necessary to see the continuing call to Christian discipleship against the particular historical background of its origin. The Christian message was born

out of the Jewish theological understanding of their history that is contained in the Old Testament. We have seen Jewish history in the Old Testament as the creation of a text that came to define a community as its 'law', a community whose experience of history was that it was calamitous. And by the first century B C, this sense of history as oppressive had intensified to the extent that not only Jews but many Gentiles felt that the only liberation that could be hoped for was the end of all history.¹¹ And Jesus, whatever else he was, was also very much a man of his time when he spoke his message in the language of apocalyptic. For as Perrin says, 'apocalyptic imagery is a natural form of expression when one is in extreme circumstances',¹² – when in other words, the issue in one way or another is one of survival. The message that Jesus spoke was to a people whose whole history had been wrought out of a struggle for survival, a history that could be seen as a preparation to understand the language in which the End of history is proclaimed.

For the majority of women in the contemporary world and throughout history, the circumstances have nearly always been extreme, the main issue has been one of survival in one way or another. And for women as a whole, the world-historical defeat of woman has been and remains a reality. Cultural and political subordination has been the price that woman has had to pay for her traditional identification and responsibility for humankind as species, as opposed to humankind as individual transcendent. And for us, now, it is precisely the future of humankind as species that is at stake. At our present historical juncture, we too, like the Jews, have moved into the experience of being a culture under threat that is faced with the most fundamental issues of survival. Like the world of the first century, we have been forced to contemplate the imminent end of history as a real possibility. As Edward Thompson says in *Protest and Survive*.¹³

“What makes the extinction of civilised life upon this island probable is not a greater propensity for evil than in previous history but a more formidable destructive technology, a deformed political process (East and West) and also a deformed culture. . . The deformation of culture commences within language itself. It makes possible a disjunction between the rationality and moral sensibility of individual men and women and the effective political and military process.”

Thus the life of the culture that has become deformed has placed the life of the species at risk. And thus the traditional responsibility of women for the species is foregrounded. Without a biological future, there can be no cultural future. Thus history affords women a voice in history for the first time in history. As

we saw, in the earlier article, this raises for us the question of what language do we speak, and of the possibility of feminist discourse. For those already familiar with the nature and operation of patriarchy, the notion of the 'deformation of culture that commences within language itself' is readily comprehensible. The inherent problem of establishing a feminist discourse is re-presented also in the dilemma of feminist political practice that I have examined. It is a dilemma that is only resolved by apprehending the real nature of our historical situation; faced with the literal possibility of the end as extinction, we are forced at last to learn the language in which the End is proclaimed, that is the language of Jesus. It is only this language that will enable us to examine the origins of the culture of deformity. For this is the language of salvation history – the history for those for whom history is no salvation. It is the language of eschatology, and it is this language that Genesis speaks. In seeking the origins of our deformity, we may return finally to the garden with the question: How did it all begin? It began, so Genesis tells us, with a woman who wanted the knowledge of Good and Evil; woman's role pictured here in 'the beginning' might give us a clue about her role in relation to the End; perhaps the time has come for her to bring the knowledge she gained from the tree to fruition and interpret the meaning of Good and Evil for this culture; to enter history to repeat the message that only the language of the Word can deliver us from the politics of death. As Phyllis Trible says in her article 'Eve and Adam'.¹⁴

"Rather than legitimating the patriarchal culture from which it comes, the myth places that culture under judgment. And thus it functions to liberate not to enslave. This function we can recover and appropriate. The Yahwist narrative tells us who we are (creatures of equality and mutuality): it tells us who we have become (creatures of oppression) and it opens up possibilities for change, for a return to our true liberation under God. In other words the story calls female and male to repent."

- 1 *Woman, Culture and Society*, eds. Rosaldo and Lamphere, California, 1979.
- 2 *Ibid.* Introduction p 3.
- 3 *Ibid.* p 67.
- 4 *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, by Juliet Mitchell. Penguin, 1974. See especially Conclusion Chap 6 'The Cultural Revolution'.
- 5 *The Crucified God*, by J Moltmann, SCM. p 326. 1974.
- 6 *Christology at the Crossroads*, Jon Sobrino. SCM p 67.
- 7 See John Atherton's article 'A Theological Critique of Thatcherism', in *Thatcherism*, The Jubilee Group Lent Lectures 1980 ed. Ken Leech.
- 8 See Timothy Radcliffe's article 'The Old Testament as Word of God; Canon and Identity' in *New Blackfriars*, June 1980, p 31.

- 9 Ibid. note 13.
- 10 See article by Terry Eagleton 'American Criticism Today' in *New Left Review*, No 127 May-June 1981.
- 11 Unpublished lecture by Timothy Radcliffe on Daniel.
- 12 See *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom*, Norman Perrin SCM 1976.
- 13 *Protest and Survivè*, eds. E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith . Penguin 1980 pp 50-51.
- 14 In *Womanspirit Rising*, eds. Christ and Plaskow.

Problems and the Rhetoric of God-Talk

Markus Wörner

In this paper it will be argued that the type of situation in which the question, Does God exist, becomes urgent for the questioner is fundamentally a rhetorical situation. It is also a situation where theology is forced to provide rhetorical answers – in the special sense of 'rhetoric' outlined here (as well as in last month's edition of this journal).¹ This is partly because of the influence on theological language which is exercised by its recipients' needs, and partly because rhetorical discourse is, from an epistemological point of view, uniquely suitable for talking about God.

When it seriously matters to someone whether God exists or not, at least this much can be said about his situation: it is one where it is felt to be urgent that some position should be reached or some decision made, but where the grounds for doing so fall considerably short of theoretical certainty. They fall short, too, of the ordinary logical and empirical grounds on which we are used to reaching decisions on simpler matters. Nonetheless, when the problem of God's existence becomes compelling, its very importance means that no solution to it is likely to be experienced as adequate unless it conforms to the highest standards of reasonableness available for dealing with such a question. At the same time, the questioner is putting his enquiry not only as an intellectual being but also as a person with emotional and moral dispositions; he requires conviction from a source which he can respect in these terms, and in order to understand an answer and to gain any satisfaction from it he needs to perceive it from an emotional situation which at least allows of its appreciation. Though one need not, for example, feel hilarious in order to believe in God, one is not likely to be able to do so from a position of total despair. The affective state of the questioner must in some way, then, be taken into account when he is provided with any attempt at an answer.

To say that these facets of the questioner must be taken account of is part of what is involved in the claim that the type of